Shen Yuan of No Relation

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Shen Yuan of No Relation

by Gemi

Summary

There is a boy digging a hole.

There should be nothing special about him. He is one of many children digging holes, each and every one eager to get a spot on Cang Qiong Mountain. At a distance, there was black hair and shabby clothes.

Yue Qingyuan could not look away from him.

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In a world where they are the same age, Shen Yuan is going to try his very best to become the best friend of his favorite protagonist and prevent the blackening of Luo Binghe! Only, there is a problem.

Shen Yuan looks way too much like the scum villain himself, Shen Qingqiu.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a boy digging a hole.

There should be nothing special about him. He is one of many children digging holes, each and every one eager to get a spot on Cang Qiong Mountain. At a distance, there was black hair and shabby clothes.

Yue Qingyuan could not look away from him.

Shen Qingqiu stood next to him, teal robes fluttering in the wind. Yue Qingyuan could feel him bristling, agitation steadily rising the longer that Qingqyuan found himself staring at that boy.

The one with the fluffy hair had already been tugged off; the one Liu-shidi had said held great potential, the one whom Shen Qingqiu had let young Ning Yingying drag up the mountain. The one that Yue Qingqyuan knew he should not have let Xiao-Jiu claim.

That boy had sat next to the one that Yue Qingqyuan was currently staring at. It was how he noticed him.

“That one too,” Shen Qingqiu snaps.

He startles; looks at Shen Qingqiu, then back down at the child below, then back at Shen Qingqiu.

“Who?” he asks calmly, knowing very well which one. Shen Qingqiu’s glare was unimpressed and scathing.

“You know who,” he hisses, sounding for a moment so much like young Xiao-Jiu that Yue Qingqyuan can’t help but smile. That, of course, only makes his friend bristle more.

“I… was considering letting him join Qiong Ding Peak,” he carefully replies, but he knows it is a losing battle. Shen Qingqiu has caught the scent, and Yue Qingqyuan for once protesting- however mildly- does not make the Qing Jing Peak Lord lose interest. It only does the opposite.

“Qing Jing Peak needs more disciples that aren’t spoiled nobles,” his fellow Lord sharply replies, “I want him.”

Yue Qingqyuan looks back down at the boy.

“Very well,” he says.

The boy is led up the mountain, offering them an awkward bow. It does not hide what caught Yue Qingqyuan's attention. He feels guilty pleasure seeing Xiao-Jiu stiffen, the way his lips grow thin from behind the fan, a view only Yue Qingqyuan is granted from his position.

The boy peeks nervously up at them when there is no response. Green eyes wide, smudges of dirt on his cheeks.

He looks identical to Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Yuan kneels next to Luo Binghe and does his very best to not stare at the man before them. He does so by staring at his hands instead, at the very edge of his vision where he can glimpse the threadbare sleeves of Luo Binghe.

It's really fucking hard to not look up.

Shen Qingqiu looks every inch a proper Immortal Cultivator.

He truly should not have been surprised by that. Shen Qingqiu may have been the scum villain of *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* but he *was* still an Immortal. Robes impeccable and gaze cold and elegance dripping off of every single movement. And yet, years living in this world, Yuan had let fading memories twist the descriptions of the antagonist. That must be the only reason why he was so side-blinded by actually *seeing him.*

Because Shen Qingqiu has long, black hair the color of ink. He has green eyes like jade and sharp cheekbones and a tilt to his mouth that is unique to him and him alone.

Except that Shen Yuan *also* has that. Black hair that's not as sleek and long and pretty, but still blacker than most. His eyes are green, though the color of glass bottles from the real world, muddied and dull. His cheekbones might be sharp because of circumstances rather than genetics.

But he has the same tilt to his mouth.

It's *damning* evidence, and he remembers how in the cursed web novel, Luo Binghe had revealed that Shen Qingqiu spent time in brothels. Shen Yuan has no idea about who his parents are; he almost assumed that the System had just plopped him into the world at five years old, *that's* how blank his memory had been.

He would have preferred that to the reality in front of him.

Is this asshole my dad??? System!! Hey!!!

The System doesn't respond.

It's a fickle thing. Barely there at all, just enough to be vaguely useful in tracking the passage of time and pointing him in the right direction. It was the one to point him towards the mountain, to the time of trying to join the sect. Giving him that little extra push of reaching far above his station of a common street rat.

Shen Yuan wants to squirm.

The Peak Lord is just *staring* at them. He hasn't even drunk his tea yet, and that is a whole other problem. He wonders if Shen Qingqiu will throw tea at both of them, or just Luo Binghe. Ming Fan wasn't allowed inside at least, so that's a small change. He had been subtly shooed off with Ning Yingying.

Shen Qingqiu picks up his tea and Shen Yuan twitches.

"... tell me," Shen Qingqiu says, putting the tea cup down, "why did you come to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect?"

His words are slow and measured, and Yuan would never have guessed how cruel the man was if he hadn't read it himself. As it is, he looks at Luo Binghe and Luo Binghe looks at him. Shen Yuan nervously bites at his lip. Luo Binghe gives a firm nod and sits up straighter.

"This disciple has always admired the many immortal masters on the mountain, their persons and demeanors both," he says, and Yuan almost melts from the relief of not going first, "if he can enter the sect and find success in his learning, this disciple's mother in heaven will be able to find peace."

"Hm." Shen Qingqiu looks at Shen Yuan.

Yuan clenches his hands in his lap and tries to not look like he is *this* close to throwing up from nerves.

It's fine, he tells himself. They've already been accepted. Chosen, even! The protagonist won't be kicked out immediately and neither will he.

"This… this disciple wishes to learn," he says, not as rehearsed as Binghe, nerves making the words come stumbling out, "to become better than he is."

He can't get anything else out.

The silence settles, and once Shen Qingqiu realizes he isn't saying more, all Yuan gets is another *hm.* It feels like a guillotine. Judgment, harsh and clear and he shouldn't care but he *does.* He almost reaches to grasp at Binghe's hand, only property and dredges of self-preservation stopping him.

Shen Qingqiu rises.

Yuan stares at the floor and tenses. He feels the man brush past them, the barest shifting of air.

“Ming Fan shall lead you to the dormitories,” the man says, “there, you will be told of the schedule that junior disciples must follow. Dismissed."

And he leaves.

Yuan sits frozen; heart beating so fast he feels like he can’t breathe. Next to him, Binghe shifts before he nudges gently at Yuan.

“Shen Yuan…?”

“I thought he would throw tea at us,” Yuan blurts out, turning to face Binghe. The protagonist blinks back at him, dark eyes confused.

“What? Why would Shizun do that?”

Shen Yuan feels his cheeks burn and he glances at the teacup. Left on the table, turning cold and barely drunk from.

“N-nevermind. I… I forgot myself. Slip of tongue.”

Why hadn’t Shen Qingqiu done it? He hadn’t even let Ming Fan stay. He had been cold and distant, and hadn't shown any reaction to their similarity even though he must have been just as shocked by it as Shen Yuan was.

Was it that simple? Was it the surprise that had saved them from being doused with tea? He frowns, confused, unaware of Binghe reaching for his hand.

“Shizun told me to show you around,” Ming Fan says, startling Yuan and Binghe, the latter snatching his hand back as they both leap to their feet to bow to their senior.

Not that Ming Fan can have been there for *much* longer than them, Yuan thinks. And he doesn’t think he imagines the flash of disappointment in Ming Fan’s eyes as the other boy takes in their dry, non-traumatized selves.

“We are honored by shixiong,” Luo Binghe says and Shen Yuan hurries to echo it, doing his best to ignore the way Ming Fan eyes him.

They get a tour; they are given time to clean themselves and they are given food.

Yuan throws up from eating too fast and too much. Binghe looks queasy as well, but handles it better and gently holds Yuan’s hair away from his face as he empties his stomach.

That’s the protagonist for you.

He met Luo Binghe two weeks before the entrance exam.

At the time, the base of the mountain had already begun to grow crowded; many were hoping to better their fortune, street rats and nobles alike. There had been fancy tents and carts housing merchants and scammers, there had been the kind of rogue cultivators that sold cheap (false) trinkets to give the test takers "a boost". The less fortunate had shared campfires and theorized what one had to do to be accepted.

Shen Yuan had been very, very cold.

It was early spring and he had tried to wash off the worst of the dirt in the Luo river. It had been absolutely freezing, just like the name hinted at, but he in turn had been *dirty and desperate.* So cold as fuck water it was, but his clothes were thin and his hair was wet and he had been shivering like his very bones would come apart.

Luo Binghe had sat by himself, blowing softly at a growing flame, coaxing it into becoming something warming. He had noticed Shen Yuan who had lingered awkwardly at the edges of his vision. His eyes had been wary, but he had still waved Shen Yuan over.

He wondered if it had been just because Luo Binghe as a child had been *kind* in the web novel, or something else. Perhaps because he and Luo Binghe had clearly been the worst off of all the people there- Shen Yuan's clothes had been reasonable at one point, but now they were in tatters and so dirty one could hardly guess their original color. Luo Binghe's clothes were the same; the only clean thing on him had been his jade pendant.

"I'm Luo Binghe," he had introduced himself. Shen Yuan, who had been guessing as much, wrinkled his nose.

"Your namesake is *really* cold," he told Luo Binghe, teeth chattering, and that had startled a laugh out of the future demon lord. Shen Yuan had felt a burst of warmth, of pride, and beamed happily back at him.

"I'm Shen Yuan," he said, and they exchanged a very manly handshake.

Somehow in those two weeks, Luo Binghe not only proved *why* he was the main character, but he also seemed to decide Shen Yuan actually deserved the attention he was subtly angling for. They had spent their evenings mumbling theories on what the sect would be like in between Shen Yuan scratching letters into the rough dirt to practice reading and Luo Binghe showing him how to keep the fire alive. What they would do as cool, badass immortal masters. Which peak they hoped for. (any that would take them, of course)

By the time that the entrance exam began, it was only natural for the both of them to dig their holes next to each other.

The dormitories were crowded.

Not… *bad* crowded. Not like a modern sweatshop or like with the Jia family, he thinks. The beds weren't squeezed together and there was one bed for each disciple and a tiny table for scrolls and future swords to rest at. And Shen Yuan had known they wouldn't get separate rooms, obviously, though the mixed genders had been a surprise, but…

But still.

The back of his neck itches and he nervously smooths his hair down, making sure it's covering his neck. He has to start tying it up soon and he doesn't know *what* he will do then, but he will figure something out. For now, he's just really, really aware of how the bullying started.

Because in the novel, Luo Binghe was the only one picked that time. The other disciples had been there for a bit longer and were sent from nobles and rich merchants and other scholarly types. The point was that Luo Binghe had stood out and been kicked out to the woodshed *day one.* And now they were *two* street rats inching their way into the dormitories of Qing Jing Peak, and Shen Yuan kind of missed having dirt on his face.

Everyone keeps *staring* at him.

There were whispers, all the time, and no one was talking *to them* yet, but the weird tension was super fucking noticeable that night as they all settled down and Ning Yingying kept chattering and he couldn't- it wasn't-

Shen Yuan buries his face in his wheat husk pillow and tries to slow his breathing. He absolutely fails and he wants to leave, but he knows people are still awake and he doesn't even want to think about the trouble he would cause by sneaking outside on the very first night.

So he tries and fails to breathe like a normal person and doesn't fall asleep until early morning.

(-10 coolness points) the system cheerfully chimes as he drags himself out of bed at the morning call and Shen Yuan hiccups a bitter laugh.

Yeah, he doesn't feel very cool.

They warm up and they run laps around the mountain. The new uniform feels itchy but clean, the high collar making it less nerve wracking to tie his hair up and out of the way. It's white and green, matching the rustling bamboo and the fluffy clouds that are just a little bit too close to feel real.

Well, it's called Qing Jing *Peak.* It makes sense that it feels like they could touch the clouds if they just jumped high enough.

It's easier to ignore the stares when he is exhausted. Luo Binghe is nearly as tired as him after they run twenty laps, the System cheering him on without awarding any points.

They are given food and Shen Yuan pokes at it more than he eats it. He doesn't want to throw it all up again like the previous day, and only Luo Binghe coaxing him makes him feel brave enough to eat *some* of it. If slowly.

They are asked about their writing and reading skills; nonexistent (Binghe) and barely understandable (Yuan) lands them in the beginner's class which has, of course, very few members as the Qing Jing Peak is known for accepting scholars above all. Ink smudges his sleeves and hands and Yuan ducks his head as he is admonished for the sloppiness.

Look, he knows how to read! And write, but writing with an ancient brush and inkwell on rough paper is *way* different from a pencil in a textbook. And all the characters are just a smidge too different, too flowery.

Also it would be bad to admit he could read as well as he did, anyway. He looks like a street rat! Was one, too, and Shen Yuan has read enough novels to know what happens if a transmigrator gets too cocky too fast.

… and he is exhausted. He will blame his mistakes on that too, actually.

By the time they are free for the day, Shen Yuan would happily pass out and die in the shadow of the tree he and Luo Binghe found some distance away from all the hustle and bustle. He lays face down in the grass and doesn't even care that he gets some of it in his mouth.

"I think my legs are gone," Luo Binghe groans and flops down next to him.

Shen Yuan snorts a laugh, then coughs as he inhales dirt.

“Imagine if we had been chosen by Bai Zhan Peak,” he says once he’s done dying to the choke hazards of nature. He turns his head so that his cheek is pressed against the ground, eyes on his friend. Shen Yuan laughs again when Luo Binghe grimaces.

“I don’t know what’s more tiring, the learning or the running,” Luo Binghe says, but then he smiles happily up at the tree above them. The leaves are a deep emerald green, the crown thick enough they can only catch brief glimpses of the orange sunset sky past it. “But we’re here! Both of us. Isn’t that amazing, Yuan?”

The protagonist says my name so familiarly, Shen Yuan thinks happily, proud of his accomplishments. Two weeks! How far he had come.

“It is,” he agrees, moving so that he is also laying on his back, mirroring Luo Binghe. The sun is setting, but not yet so low that they have to crawl their way back to the dormitories.

His smile falters.

“Do you think that Shizun…” he begins, only to falter. Shen Yuan feels more than sees Luo Binghe turn to look at him. Wiggling closer until their pinkies brush, and Shen Yuan has to resist the childish urge to take Binghe’s hand and squeeze for comfort.

“... you’re very similar,” Luo Binghe says slowly and carefully. He clearly wants to know *more,* but Shen Yuan has no clue what to even say. He didn't know he would be related to the Scum Villain! How many comments hadn’t he left on *Proud Immortal Demon’s Way* about how Shen Qingqiu should be castrated? And here he was, very likely the asshole’s *child.* Hadn’t the guy been married or something? Did the future wife of Luo Binghe abandon Shen Yuan because he looked like a tiny copy of the most evil dude ever?

Shen Yuan sighs and presses his hands to his eyes, grounding down with a groan.

“A-Luo! A-Yuan!” Ning Yingying’s cheerful voice cuts through the air like a bird’s chirp and Shen Yuan scrambles to sit up, twisting to look at her. His heart beats too loudly in his chest from the surprise, but he still manages a polite (though weak) smile at her.

“Shijie,” he greets, brushing away grass from his clothes, cheeks flushing with embarrassment at his own behavior. Luo Binghe, who sat up almost as quickly as he had, offered a smile at her.

“What are you doing?” the girl asks, her orange ribbons fluttering in the breeze. She is all chubby cheeks still, just a year older than them, and definitely a very cute child. He just wishes she wasn’t so… *sudden.* And so familiar, so quickly. They met *yesterday.*

“We were recovering from today,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan dares to sneak him a grateful smile for the save, being given an understanding one in turn before Binghe focuses on Ning Yingying, “it was a lot to remember.”

“First day is always a lot,” the girl cheerfully agrees, flopping down next to Luo Binghe in a tumble of limbs and ribbons. Luo Binghe scoots away to give her space, bumping into Shen Yuan instead. They spent enough time huddling around a tiny fire before the exam, so Shen Yuan doesn’t mind.

“How long has Shijie been a disciple?” Luo Binghe asks.

Shen Yuan takes two grass blades and begins to twine them. Is this when Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying become childhood sweethearts? Friends with something more? Is he supposed to scuttle off and fade into the background now?

He never did figure out if he was a brand new NPC or an unused plotdevice. Maybe he was here in the original, too, but so minor his name was never brought up. Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose at the thought.

“Two years,” Ning Yingying says, then she peers around Luo Binghe to stare at Shen Yuan, “you look *so* much like Shizun, A-Yuan!”

He twists the grass too hard.

“Um,” he chokes out, “y-yes, this one does.”

“That’s a good thing,” she assures him, mistaking his unease about being related to a Scum villain for something else, “Shizun is *very* handsome and refined! He is the smartest Lord of all the Peaks, I’m sure! He plays qi better than anyone, it’s beautiful, and he doesn’t let anyone tell him what to do if he thinks they’re not worth listening to.”

So he’s a snob and a bitch, Shen Yuan doesn’t say.

“That’s reassuring,” he mumbles instead and Ning Yingying continues to prattle on, comparing traits here and there before she dives into a different subject. Twice she asks if they are related and twice Luo Binghe runs interference like he is taking a bullet, like Shen Yuan is the president and he’s the bodyguard.

Having the protagonist on his side is *such* a relief.

Eventually they have to trudge back to the dormitories. He spots Shen Qingqiu in the distance on their walk, the Peak Lord gazing down from his bamboo house at all the disciples making their way to bed. Shen Yuan wonders if he is looking at him, specifically. If he can see him and Luo Binghe and if so, who is he staring at the hardest? Or perhaps he is staring at Ning Yingying who is walking backwards to keep them in her sight, laughing as she bumps into the other junior disciples.

And then they are inside, the door sliding shut and the soft shuffling of uniforms being shed and blankets being moved and bickering and muttering of their peers all around.

Shen Yuan makes sure to pull his blanket over his head this time. It muffles the sound of his fellow disciples, making it easier to pretend no one is staring. This way, he can instead focus

on how much his body aches from the busy day.

He manages to sleep; but not restfully.

Yue Qingyuan's black and gray robes stand out amongst the green of Qing Jing Peak. Like a drop of ink on green silk, everyone notices and everyone wants to do something but they don't quite know *what.*

However, Shen Yuan hasn't slept for three weeks in any way that matters and he is really, *really* fucking tired. The Sect Master of Cang Qiong Mountain is a mere blip on his radar as he scrambles past, focused on getting to the baths before everyone else.

"Disciple Shen Yuan," the Lord of Qiong Ding Peak greets and Shen Yuan freezes mid yawn, slowly turning his head to stare.

Yue Qingyuan smiles at him. It's a very nice smile, kindly and patient and inviting for a nice little chat. He is a handsome man, forever young the way many Immortal masters were, but *warm* , somehow.

Horrified, Shen Yuan finally remembers how to bow.

"S-Shibo! This humble disciple greets you," he stutters as he does so, "can- that is, can- may I be of assistance? To Shibo?"

He wants to die, actually. Just melt on the spot, evaporate. Yue Qingyuan was one of those characters that had always intrigued Shen Yuan when he read *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* A character so powerful he never even drew his sword, who had the respect of demons and humans alike? He had wanted to know what Yue Qingyuan's sword looked like, he had wanted that fight scene *so* badly.

Instead his death had been horribly written, utterly anticlimactic.

And now he knew Shen Yuan's name. Which was wonderful and horrible all at once, because there were certainly many different reasons for such a thing.

"This master does require assistance," the man says, and Shen Yuan dares to exit his bow. He tries to not fidget and fails miserably, fingers twitching, "this one needs a guide to your Shizun's whereabouts."

Oh fuck off.

“Mn,” he gets out, then clears his throat, “this disciple would be honored, Sect Leader.”

Obviously Yue Qingyuan knows where *Shen Qingqiu lives.* It’s a blatant lie, but one he can’t call the Sect Leader out on. He doesn’t wrinkle his nose or glare at the man, but for a short moment his nerves disappear as he tugs his sleeves down to cover his fingers, as he stands up a little straighter.

The corners of Yue Qingyuan’s mouth twitch. His eyes sparkle, and that is so, so weird that Shen Yuan hurriedly turns away to lead them to their doom.

“Have you and your fellow disciple settled in well?” Yue Qingyuan asks as they walk up the winding stairs of Qing Jing Peak. The stairs are worn down the middle from generations of people walking them. It’s the kind of detail that sometimes just slams into Shen Yuan, reminding him that all these twelve years are *real.*

“Are you speaking of disciple Luo Binghe, Shibo?” he asks, but who else could it be? They were the only two new disciples as far as he knew.

“Indeed. Your master was most insistent on having both of you join Qing Jing Peak.”

Shen Yuan stumbles.

Yue Qingyuan steadies him, for there’s a real danger of just falling all the way back down like a rolling ball and also possibly breaking his neck. Shen Yuan can feel his entire body burst into humiliating flames because what kind of disciple nearly dies on the *stairs???* It’s embarrassing enough that he only manages a stuttered *thank you* before he speeds ahead, nerves too jittery to allow a slow pace.

For a cultivator, though, it’s probably still about as slow as a snail.

“He- yes! Yes, both of us disciples have settled in well,” he rambles, too aware of the *swish-swish* sound of robes behind him, of how the bamboo house is getting terrifyingly closer for each speed-walking step, “we are currently being given the privilege and honor of learning how to read and write, so that we may catch up with our seniors! It’s- it’s very nice.”

Holy shit, nice??? *Nice?????*

“It pleases this master to hear so,” the Sect Leader says and for the shortest moments, the most brief of seconds, Shen Yuan feels relief as they reach the bamboo house. He has already ruined his image. Perhaps Shen Qingqiu won’t be so bad now, since Shen Yuan has already made an utter fool of himself in front of *the Sect Leader.*

This illusion lasts until he realizes that Shen Qingqiu is not inside the house.

He is, in fact, outside of it. By the door.

Glaring.

Ming Fan is next to him, arms heavy with scrolls, eyes darting between them all. Shen Yuan feels his very soul flutter with dread.

“Zhangmen-shixiong.”

It sounds like the winds of winter; Shen Yuan shivers, then flinches as Shen Qingqiu’s eyes land on him. They are narrow the way knives are sharpened, and Yuan is quick to avert his own.

“Qingqiu-shidi,” the suicidal Sect Leader says, stepping forward. He brushes past Shen Yuan, robes fluttering in the wind as he offers an amicable smile towards the Qing Jing Peak Lord, “this Zhangmen hopes he is not interrupting anything of importance.”

Shen Yuan does not have to look up to feel the temperature drop below freezing. He stands frozen, wondering if Luo Binghe will miss him when Shen Qingqiu makes the inevitable decision to simply kill everyone present.

“Leave.”

Shen Yuan startles.

“Both of you,” Shen Qingqiu says, not looking at Ming Fan or Shen Yuan, jade green eyes focused solely on Yue Qingyuan.

They scramble.

The stairs down are long and winding, shielded with bamboo in short bursts. It’s easy to get out of view quickly, and what Shen Yuan should do is keep running. If the scum villain tells you to beat it, that is what one must do.

However, curiosity killed the cat.

Shen Yuan stops and ducks low behind an aesthetically placed rock. Ming Fan stops as well, confused, before he picks up on the sounds of intense Peak Lord discussion.

Then Ming Fan looks outraged; but he also ducks down, tilting his head to listen. It doesn’t stop him from sending Shen Yuan disapproving death glares, and of course that makes him feel all itchy with nerves. But he *needs* to know why Yue Qingyuan would show up where he isn’t wanted and it *must* have something to do with Shen Yuan, considering the lies of needing a guide. And if there is something he has learnt from the world, it’s that learning anything you can is only beneficial.

“Qingqiu-shidi appears to be doing well,” Yue Qingyuan says after a moment, “That is a comfort. This one wished to see how the new disciples were settling in, and have only heard good things so far.”

What, the five minute long walk of Shen Yuan tripping on stairs???

“And since when has Zhangmen-shixiong felt the need to visit new disciples?” is the cutting reply, “one would think Cang Qiong Mountain’s *leader* would be busy with other duties, rather than visit disciples not of his own peak.”

Oh wow. Holy shit.

“I seek only comfort for all members of our sect. Disciple Shen Yuan spoke well of his education. This one only wished to praise Qingqiu-shidi for his excellent teachings,” is warmly replied.

“One would think Zhangmen-shixiong is *doubting* this one’s skills rather than praising them, as he felt the need to visit himself rather than trust the reports,” Shen Qingqiu hisses back, barely loud enough for the two disciples to hear. But the venom drips from each word, enough that they both shudder.

“I hold nothing but respect for Qingqiu-shidi’s way of teaching. I… confess to being curious, as disciple Shen Yuan… as this one had considered disciple Shen Yuan for Qiong Ding Peak. I’m only glad that Xiao-Yuan is settling in well under his Shizun. It’s comforting to see your relationship grow.”

Shen Yuan flushes at the *Xiao,* confusion and horror battling for dominance. The way Ming Fan looks seconds away from an aneurysm doesn’t help, and there is of course the small detail of Shen Qingqiu never having spoken to Yuan after their first meeting, meaning there *is* no fucking relationship to ‘grow’.

There are some assumptions being made and I will be the one punished for it! Please stop talking, Sect Leader!

Shen Yuan can almost *feel* it in the air, the shift going from acid to *murder.* He is half-certain that Shen Qingqiu’s spite changed the direction of the wind itself.

“If you are *implying* something, you should stop,” Shen Qingqiu says in the way a bear trap slams down, “I claim no relationship to that child. If you seek to curry favor with him based on *false assumptions,* then do it somewhere else! For I will *not* tolerate favoritism based on falsehoods and idiocy on *my* Peak.”

“Xiao-Jiu–”

“Yue Qingyuan, speak no more. Leave and don’t mention that child to me ever again.”

That’s their cue to leave.

Chapter End Notes

Would it be Shen Jiu and Yue Qingyuan if they didn't have that one-sided divorce vibe?

Thank you for reading! This is my first time writing for this fandom, so I hope it was fun!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing Ming Fan does is to scold Shen Yuan for his unacceptable behavior. The boy doesn't seem as ashamed as he should be, *intentionally* eavesdropping on their superiors. It makes Ming Fan want to make sure it sticks in his head.

But what they both had overheard is burning inside him. So he lets the child (claiming to be two years younger, but he is so *small* so it must be a lie) run off with a warning.

The second thing he does is find his friends.

"I think Shen Yuan is Shizun's bastard child," he tells them after he tugs them off to an empty corner of the courtyard. Zhao De and Cui Wenyan exchange glances.

"Was that not obvious?" Cui Wenyan haltingly asks.

"I thought it was simply unsaid," Zhao De adds, but his brown eyes have narrowed, "you certainly disapproved of us speaking about it."

"Alright, fine, yes, it was very obvious," Ming Fan agrees. Obviously it had been clear as day. Shen Yuan looked nearly identical to their master, with just a few things pointing him out as the street rat he used to be- including his squirrely behavior. He had just thought it was very disrespectful to talk about such things. It was *Shizun.* "but I overheard Master Yue Qingyuan speaking with Shizun. Now it is guaranteed! But," and here he leans in closer, lowering his voice, "Shizun claims no relation."

The other two take that in.

Ming Fan understands. He himself can hardly believe it and he was *there.* Or close enough to hear, anyway. Their glorious, most talented Shizun had a child and wanted nothing to do with him. It almost made it seem like those awful rumors of Shen Qingqiu visiting brothels to be *true.*

Obviously they weren't though.

"My father has a bastard son," Zhao De says. He nods solemnly at the shocked looks from his fellow disciples, "it's awful. We are expected to care, when the bastard has nothing to offer us except embarrassment. Shizun likely does not want the brat to stain his reputation and is doing what he can to put distance. The brat can't even *write."*

"But he's in the sect now. He is part of our *Peak,"* Cuin Wenyan says with a frown, "how are we to prevent him from ruining Shizun's reputation?"

Ming Fan *hmm's.*

"The way we always handle the unworthy," he decides, "we will just show him why he won't ever become better than what he is."

"I met the Sect Leader," Shen Yuan whispers to Luo Binghe on their way back to the dormitories. Both of them have wet hair, because in the end Shen Yuan didn't manage to get to the baths before everyone else and it got late, "it was *strange."*

Luo Binghe blinks at him, then smiles, the cute one where he looks almost helplessly surprised by it. It's one of Shen Yuan's favorite smiles and he thinks *Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky* was cruel for not describing it in detail. Less *papapa,* more smile descriptions! Hack writer.

"Meeting the honored Sect Leader was strange?" Luo Binghe whispers back.

"It was. He kept asking about my- our studies."

"He *is* the Sect Leader. It's… nice to hear that he cares for us, even if we are not disciples of his peak."

"Well, yes. But I was so surprised by him speaking to me that I nearly fell-" he winces as Zhao De, three years older, bumps into him. Except it doesn't feel like an accidental bump so much as a targeted *shove.* Only Luo Binghe's steadying hands stops him from falling face first into the cobbled courtyard of the dormitories. He clings to his friend as he gets his feet back under him.

"Ow," he mutters, frowning at the back of Zhao De, "why was he in such a hurry?"

"He should have at least apologized," Luo Binghe says, and when Shen Yuan looks at him he is surprised to see the other boy *glaring* at Zhao De's back, "you could have been hurt!"

"But I was not, thanks to you," Shen Yuan assures him, giving his arm a squeeze before he steps back, "perhaps he had a bad day."

"That does not excuse rudeness."

Shen Yuan huffs a laugh.

"It is fine, Binghe."

Luo Binghe scowls but gives in with a reluctant nod, sticking close enough their hands keep brushing. It's nice, knowing the protagonist cares for him. He has truly successfully clung to the golden thighs.

They pass Ming Fan on the way inside, and Shen Yuan pretends he doesn't see him. The older boy had ranted at him after they had escaped being discovered (and murdered) by Shen Qingqiu, and it had taken everything in Shen Yuan to act cowed and sorry instead of pointing out that Ming Fan had *also* listened in, thank you very much. Best to just pretend he doesn't know Ming Fan is there to avoid another lecture.

Shen Yuan misses Ming Fan's smirk.

Ning Yingying pouts.

"But your hair is as long as mine," she whines, tugging at one of her orange ribbons, "and I need to practice braids. Please, A-Yuan, A-Luo!"

Shen Yuan pauses in his scrubbing. Ning Yingying whining about playing with their hair is a good excuse to pause the awfulness which is scrubbing laundry. He misses dry cleaners, where he ran no risk of getting his hands all red and wrinkly in the quest for clean clothes.

"Shijie," he says, "this one does not have time for such things. But maybe Binghe," he adds, sending the other boy a smile, "does. His hair *is* very fluffy." And it's time they became childhood sweethearts, too. It would be a good start now- Luo Binghe is being weirdly slow about it.

Luo Binghe smiles back, a quick quirk of lips, before he shakes his head.

"If you do not have the time, neither do I. Does Meifen-Shijie not have long hair as well?"

"Yes but she did not want my hands near it," Ning Yinying sighs mournfully, "I would be careful! It is not like I would *cut* it or anything, I only wish to practice braiding!" And then she frowns down at them where they kneel by the washing basins, surrounded by baskets of dirty laundry yet to be cleaned, "And why are only the two of you doing this? Should there not be others as well?"

"They all had their own chores," Shen Yuan says, though he privately agrees. This amount of laundry is just insane, and some of the stains have now scarred him for life. On top of that, originally it was *just him.* He is happy that Luo Binghe had finished his own chores early and had come to help, because *WTF??* Do the Qing Jing Peak only take care of their laundry once every three weeks??? So stupid. "Does Shijie not also have chores?"

Ning Yingying blushes.

That's a relief, at least. He had been getting worried that Shen Qingqiu spoiled her so much that she really wouldn't have had any chores. But it seemed she did, and Shen Yuan huffs a laugh.

"Is Shijie avoiding her duties?" he asks innocently, only to flinch when she swats at him for the cheek.

"This- this Shijie was only checking on her Shidi," she defends herself, face bright red, "on her way to her duties. That is all!"

Luo Binghe gets up and wipes his wet hands on his legs, moving to nudge Ning Yingying towards the door.

"This Shidi wouldn't want Shijie to be in trouble with Shizun for neglecting her duties," he says, and Shen Yuan breathes out and goes back to scrubbing, "let us meet again when it's time to eat?"

"Oh, very well," Ning Yingying says, but her smiling face ensures that they know she isn't offended, "but I will not stop asking for the practice! I will see you later, A-Luo, A-Yuan."

"Good bye, Shijie."

Shen Yuan looks around them after she leaves, then sighs.

"Maybe we should have asked her to bring the food here," he says mournfully, reaching for the next uniform. It has… *brown stains on it.* Shen Yuan shudders. "I don't think we will be done in our lifetime."

"I will run and find us food if it takes that long," Luo Binghe assures him, switching out the water from his basin. The water splashes down, washing over Shen Yuan's bare feet, before it reaches the drain.

At least Airplane had made sure to write decent plumbing into the story.

The most surprising thing of all- other than Shen Yuan possibly being Shen Qingqiu's son, a fact he keeps doing his very best to forget and ignore, especially after having heard Yue Qingyuan *almost say it*- is that if he feels like it, Shen Qingqiu is actually a decent teacher.

The kind that makes students cry and isn't shy to whack their fingers for fucking up a bit too much. But he still, somehow, manages to explain how to play a guqin in such a way that Shen Yuan actually understands.

It's even more impressive considering that as far as the Peak Lord is concerned, Shen Yuan doesn't exist.

He takes the time to explain to Ming Fan, to Ning Yingying and even Cui Wenyan (who is awful at it, and has to replace the strings four times in two lessons) and demonstrates up front where everyone can see.
But not once does his eyes stray towards the corner Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe occupy.

It should be a relief.

It *is* a relief.

He doesn't want the scum villain to remember that Luo Binghe exists.

And yet, Shen Yuan worries at his bottom lip when he once again plays a tune perfectly and receives–

Nothing.

He hunches over his calligraphy, trying his very best to draw a smooth line without smudging what he has already painted. The sound of brushes on paper has become familiar and soothing, the odd scent of wet ink just another thing he has grown to enjoy.

It makes it easier to pretend he's alone in the room.

He isn't, of course. He is not in an actual class, but rather in the room where disciples go to practice more quiet activities. Reading, painting, calligraphy. But the key word is *quiet* activities. Like a modern library.

Which is very nice; he doesn't have to worry about any sudden interruptions.

Except; a tug on his hair.

He startles; brush dragging messily across his work, utterly ruining it. Heart pounding and eyes wide, Shen Yuan looks over his shoulder.

Zhao De frowns at him, looking bemused rather than insulted. (for once)

“You need to go and dust the shelves in storage,” Zhao De tells him in a low voice, barely more than a whisper in the quiet room, and Shen Yuan nods and gets up. He can’t help but smooth out the ponytail, to tug on his collar to make sure it’s still high.

He clumsily gathers up the supplies and puts them back where he took them, before he hurries to do as told, eager to get started.

Shen Yuan has to take a moment to breathe once he’s alone.

Just a short little moment.

“Wait, you’re allowed to use the kitchens?” Shen Yuan exclaims.

“Mmhm,” Luo Binghe replies, humble-proud enough that Shen Yuan almost pinches his cheek in retaliation, “as long as I behave.” His friend smiles at him, so pretty and cute even at fucking *twelve* that Shen Yuan bets about fifteen possible wives cried right that moment without even knowing why. “Do you have any requests, Yuan?”

Shen Yuan blinks.

“You would cook for me?”

“Who else?”

Your wives??? Oh wait. We’re twelve.

“Oh. Thank you,” he says, rubbing at his suddenly warm cheeks. He’s *not* blushing. It’s just nice, knowing the protagonist wants to cook for him. He wonders if Luo Binghe is already an awesome cook, or if it’s a thing he learns later, “anything you want to make, I would… I would love to eat.”

Luo Binghe’s smile widens.

He makes congee.

Shen Yuan definitely doesn’t almost cry.

Shen Yuan idly pokes at the mottled green on his knee.

He's been falling a lot lately; mishaps where he has been carrying too much and doesn't see where he is going until it's too late, one of the older disciples bumping into him and too busy to stop and help. Most often Luo Binghe manages to keep him from going down too hard, and more than once his friend got in trouble for snapping back at their seniors to be *careful.* But even with the protagonist catching him eight out of ten, there's bruises from all the times he couldn't.

The uniform hides it all, thankfully. He doesn't want more attention than necessary and the idea of getting medical attention has him shuddering, making him want to scratch at the back of his neck.

It's only bruises, anyway, and all because he was clumsy.

Hell, Luo Binghe got a nosebleed from Ning Yingying when she accidentally absolutely nailed him in the face with her elbow. That's *way* worse, and *Luo Binghe* sure didn't need any help.

Shen Yuan looks down at himself.

He's alone for once; Luo Binghe had been asked to chop some firewood, Ning Yingying was busy somewhere else and Shen Yuan was finished with chores. So he is alone by their favorite tree, and it had been morbid curiosity that had him roll up his sleeves and pants.

It's nothing, he tells himself, taking in the mosaic of bruises crawling across his limbs. He's just really fucking clumsy, which is nothing new in this or his previous lifetime.

Only… it just looks like a lot, all piled together like this.

It feels weird. Makes him feel uneasy as he pokes at a purple-red one from when he tumbled down the stairs two days ago.

There's the rustle of grass; Shen Yuan looks up as he hurriedly tugs on his clothes to hide it all, but it's only Ming Fan and his friends.

He blinks up at them.

The way they tower above him makes him feel queasy. They are grinning, and the way the tree's shadow falls on them makes his throat feel tight, makes him clutch at the grass enough he can feel his nails digging into the dirt.

"You're not even going to greet us?" Ming Fan scoffs, "a Shidi should be *respectful* and *diligent.* But here you are, ignoring your duties and lazing about."

“This one apologizes?” he says, except it comes out as a confused question instead. Cui Wenyan and Zhao De, standing on either side of Ming Fan, both roll their eyes in creepy coordination, “this Shidi was unaware he had chores left. And- and Shixiong surprised me. This one apologizes for not giving the proper greeting.”

Even as he speaks, he can’t help but scoot away. His back hits the tree, and the movement only makes the trio before him look gleeful.

He feels nauseous.

Ming Fan throws something at his face; Shen Yuan flinches but is unable to avoid it. What hits him is a book; a thin one, not doing more than making his nose sting. It looks old and worn, barely holding together.

“This should help you *learn,”* Zhao De says, “don’t worry, you can share it with your friend too.”

“We don’t want either of you to bring shame to our Shizun,” Cui Wenyan haughtily says.

Shen Yuan doesn’t point out that Cui Wenyan is a lost cause for the guqin, or that Zhao De is terribly clumsy, always bumping into Shen Yuan. It feels like a bad idea.

He just stares down at the cultivation manual in his lap, mind whirling and belly feeling like it’s filled with ice.

“Well?” Ming Fan says, stepping closer, “be grateful!”

“T-Thank you, Shixioung. This one is honored by your help,” he stutters, words spilling past his lips before he can think, cradling the book to his chest, “thank you.”

They grumble at him and mock him a bit more before they leave, laughing loudly and sparing no glance back at him.

It wasn’t that bad, he tells himself and looks down at the book in his lap. It really wasn’t. Nothing at all like what Luo Binghe went through in the web novel. They hadn’t even touched him.

He still feels like he is going to throw up.

The cultivation manual is fake.

Obviously.

Shen Yuan can't exactly *say* that, though, now can he? He isn't supposed to know that it's a fake. He is supposed to be grateful. He and Luo Binghe are supposed to use a shitty, fake cultivation manual that could *severely injure them.*

Luo Binghe will be fine with his protagonist powers, of course. He will seem a bit slower than everyone else but he will somehow survive it.

Shen Yuan isn't so sure about himself.

He briefly considers throwing it away, or just hiding it. But in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* it was Shen Qingqiu who told Ming Fan to give out the manual. When Luo Binghe hadn't taken care of it well enough, he was punished.

And while Shen Yuan was the one who received it this time, he was meant to *share.* So what will happen if Shen Qingqiu finds out he hasn't used the manual? Or worse, gotten rid of it?

(what would Ming Fan and his friends do, sharing the same dormitories?)

It's all such bullshit.

Shen Yuan wants to scream into his pillow but of course he can't. Because they are surrounded on all sides and *fuck,* how will he ever sleep again?

He squeezes his eyes shut and burrows in under his blanket.

There must be a solution. But he is far too aware of how he is twelve years old and it doesn't matter that he remembers a life before this one. He is still a scrawny little thing that no one will listen to.

He makes a list.

Obviously not on any paper; he makes it in his head, compiles it the way he used to compile each and every stupid plot hole of *Proud Immortal Demon Way* before he wrote out a detailed comment telling the author exactly why he was a money-grabbing lazy-ass writer. This list, however, is not one pointing out why wife *#49* could have just eaten a specific magic flower to solve her 'unique' problem without *papapa.*

This is a list about bullying.

It begins with what he remembers Luo Binghe suffered through at the hands of Shen Qingqiu.

Being tied up and whipped. Extreme chores, missed meals and sleeping in a woodshed. Given a false cultivation manual as well as beatings. Stolen jade pendant. The extreme whump of a dark protagonist truly didn't fail.

Except, of course, none of that had happened yet. Luo Binghe made sure they both ate on time and his chores were quickly handled. Only the woodchopping took time due to the distance and the time consuming part of delivering the wood to where it was needed.

It was more difficult figuring out what could be seen as bullying to himself.

There was the shoving. Some of it had to be on purpose, but surely not *all* of it. Shen Yuan truly was clumsy, and he had already been struggling with the physical parts of cultivation *before* Ming Fan had thrown the fake manual at him. So surely at least half of it truly were accidents.

The chores were probably the most blatant ones. It had been a bit strange, to be given so much to do. Things that he now knew should probably have at least two more disciples helping out. But it hadn't felt too bad- Luo Binghe was always quick to join when he could, and spending time with the protagonist was always a pleasure.

But would it escalate? Things usually did. But *how?*

Shen Yuan shivers.

"Yuan?"

He twitches; looks up from the cup of tea he had been staring at. It's gone cold, which is a shame. It was a nice tea. Very sweet.
Luo Binghe is looking at him. He is holding Shen Yuan's hand, he realizes. He must have been tapping at the table.

"Yes, Binghe?" he replies, cheeks heating up. He must have annoyed his friend, to the point that the only solution had been for Luo Binghe to trap his hand in his. That's so *embarrassing.*

Luo Binghe's eyes search his face. He wonders what he is looking for; Shen Yuan offers a confused smile. In the future, that stare will be the thing to make even the most dull wives feel special. Now, Luo Binghe still has puppy fat clinging to his cheeks, and locks have escaped the ponytail he put his hair in to frame his face.

"I'm wondering what you are thinking of," Luo Binghe finally says, giving Shen Yuan's hand a squeeze, "you seem distracted."

"Oh, um. Just wondering where my blanket went, haha."

Luo Binghe's face darkens. Shen Yuan winces.

Alright, so maybe the answer is obvious. His blanket had been gone last night when it was time for bed and Ming Fan's friends had looked a bit too amused, watching Shen Yuan wring his hands with stress. He wouldn't have been able to sleep at all if Luo Binghe hadn't given his blanket to him instead.

Obviously he had tried to say no! But Luo Binghe was stubborn and well-spoken for a fellow street rat, and quite honestly Shen Yuan felt like he had been bulldozed into compliance. He had tried to suggest they would share it instead- like a sleepover! Never mind that they shared the same dormitory- but one of the rules were *no bed sharing.*

Probably because it was mixed gender.

So dangerous! How come Binghe didn't have a whole harem before he got yeeted into the Abyss??? All the girls were right there!!

"I'll return it today, I promise," he tells Luo Binghe, "I can just get a new one! We did the laundry yesterday, there's plenty of new blankets to borrow."

"It shouldn't have disappeared to begin with," Luo Binghe mumbles, which yeah. Shen Yuan has to nod in agreement, before he remembers that he *really* doesn't want the protagonist to know about the bullying.

"Oh I'm sure I just misplaced it somehow. You know me, this one is always close to death upon waking," he assures him, "maybe I thought it was a towel. Could be it's still waiting for this one back at the baths, wondering where its master went. Poor thing."

Luo Binghe's lips twitch, then he laughs. That is a *much* better look on the protagonist's face. Shen Yuan beams back, happy to be the cause for it. Luo Binghe's smiles had been rare and small at the start of their friendship. Shen Yuan treasured every single one now.

"Still, I'll happily let my blanket remain yours until it is found," Luo Binghe says, "This one thinks it's getting too warm to sleep under one, so it would be no trouble."

Hm, true. Summer had begun to approach and it *had* begun to get pretty warm even up on the mountain peaks. And Luo Binghe's hair was thick and fluffy and curly, barely tamed on good days. Shen Yuan didn't envy him.

"I know how to braid?" he slowly offers, "would that help you with the warm nights?"

Luo Binghe blinks at him.

"You do?"

"Mmhm. Oh, don't tell Ning-Shijie," he hurries to add, *"please.* She is very kind and very enthusiastic." Which was a very nice way of saying she would demand he braid her hair until the day he died, and Shen Yuan would rather not.

Luo Binghe's eyes sparkle; he nods in agreement, and lets go of Shen Yuan's hand to instead push the tiny plate of treats he made. It's amazing what the protagonist can make in a simple kitchen!

"An early payment, then, for braiding this one's hair in the future," he teases, and Shen Yuan laughs and accepts.

He can go back to the list later.

For now, he would rather praise Luo Binghe's culinary talents and *not* think about what Ming Fan's group of bullies will steal next.

The laundry has fallen in a sad, dirty pile by the Peak Lord's feet.

Shen Qingqiu does not kill him.

It's a great shock, because Shen Yuan had turned the corner carrying dirty laundry (again. Did those bullies roll their uniforms in *shit* every night? How were they so damn dirty and *fragrant???)* and he had been walking too quickly and- well-

Shen Yuan stands as still as a statue.

This is the first time in weeks he has been so close to Shen Qingqiu- he has always been careful to keep his distance, and the Qing Jing Peak Lord had seemed to return the sentiment.

He wonders if a cultivator can hear how hard his heart is beating.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes meet his; he can only see the man's eyes, the fan held high enough to hide Shen Qingqiu's mouth. It's a nice fan. It has cranes painted on it and looks very *aesthetic.* Shen Yuan would much rather focus on the artistic beauty of that fan than the green eyes resting above it. He feels like he is going to throw up from nerves.

Slowly, a brow raises.

Shen Yuan pales.

"This disciple begs for forgiveness!" he *squeaks,* someone kill him *now,* please, "this one- this one did not watch his steps, and for that I am deeply sorry, Shizun!"

"Hm."

The fuck. Why was a HM scary???

Shen Yuan decides to pretend that was an unsaid order to pick it all up. So he kneels on the floor and begins to shove it all back into the laundry basket as fast as he can, biting his lip hard enough he thinks it might start bleeding.

Shen Qingqiu does not move, nor does he speak.

Shen Yuan stumbles back up onto his feet, the laundry basket once more overflowing with clothes. He hugs it close to him, a past burden now a barrier of protection against the scum villain.

There is the sound of a fan snapping shut; he flinches at the sound, taking a step back before his mind catches up. Once again, Shen Yuan freezes as his heart races.

The silence is thick enough to cut.

Shen Qingqiu seemed to search his face. He wonders what the man could possibly be looking for; Shen Yuan knows what he looks like. Hair coming undone from where he tied it back, clothes rumpled from rushing about the whole day. Grass stains on his knees, a blooming bruise at his jaw.

Hardly impressive.

“Your face,” Shen Qingqiu finally says, words short and clipped, like scissors cutting through rope, “how did you injure your face?”

“This one was- this one gained the injury at p-practice, Shizun.”

It’s not even a lie. That bruise, of all the bruises he has, he did not get from being shoved around. It was instead from a well-placed whack of a wooden sword he failed to block.

Those green eyes narrow into knife edge sharpness.

“Be better,” Shen Qingqiu says and moves past.

It feels like someone wrung his heart out of all its blood. A final blow to his pride, and Shen Yuan winces and ducks his head, moving to the side to allow passage. The scum villain spares him no second glance.

At least he survived the encounter.

Wet laundry is heavy.

Obviously that's very logical. That does not, however, change the fact that he has to hang all of it outside to dry. The repeating motion is straining, especially considering just how *much* laundry he has scrubbed. And yes, exactly, that too- he has just spent *hours scrubbing.*

At least Luo Binghe is helping.

Together they hang it all up to dry. Sheets and uniforms, robes and underwear. Luo Binghe had only been able to help halfway through but that's better than nothing. Besides, he keeps being sent off to chop wood. A lil' bit sus, Peerless Cucumber thinks. He doesn't want Luo Binghe to follow the original plotline of being bullied.

"Do you think that Ming Fan and his friends are having trouble with their bowels?" he asks, having to jump a bit to get the sheets over the ropes. Why is he so fucking *short.*

Luo Binghe laughs and helps him smooth the sheets out.

"There *were* a lot of odd stains," he agrees, and they share the kind of mischievous grin only twelve year olds can make, "maybe we should tell Shizun."

Shen Yuan grimaces.

"I'm afraid Qingqiu-shidi has no interest in knowing such things," Yue Qingyuan says and Shen Yuan screams.

They both stare at him. Shen Yuan feels his cheeks burn with shame, because the scream had been at the pitch of a dog's hearing. He decides to hide his red face by offering a bow rather than trying to hide behind his hands.

"Shibo! This disciple did not know you were here! I- this one apologizes!"

Yue Qingyuan merely smiles.

"This master apologizes for startling you," he says, "though it is a relief to hear you have such healthy lungs."

Shen Yuan gives Yue Qingyuan a look of horror.

Is… the Sect Leader… *teasing him???*

WHY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He feels Luo Binghe move to his side, probably aiming for reassuring when all Shen Yuan wants is to be left alone with his embarrassment.

"This one greets the Sect Leader," Luo Binghe says with a bow, "how may this humble one

serve?”

Shen Yuan side-eyes him. How come only the protagonist has a tongue made of gold? Why can Luo Binghe speak without hesitation, full of grace, *at twelve years old,* when Shen Yuan is technically an adult man in a child’s body?

Okay, well, he will admit that his brain is definitely very *Child.* He tries to not think too much about it, because it freaks him out that if he *tries,* he can actively feel his thought process being different from his Nice Calm Adult Self (who did not at all die raging) and he just rather let some things be. He got enough on his plate.

“This master is merely visiting Qing Jing Peak to pay a visit to a friend,” Yue Qingyuan says, and now Shen Yuan side-eyes *him* instead, because he thinks there’s only one person the Sect Leader would like to meet for some unfathomable reason and he really, *really* doesn’t think that Shen Qingqiu would call them friends.

“Do you need help finding him?” Shen Yuan says and slaps a hand over his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Luo Binghe staring at him in disbelief.

Yue Qingyuan’s smile widens and his eyes do that sparkle thing again.

“This master would be grateful if disciple Shen Yuan could guide him,” he says pleasantly, sealing Shen Yuan with his self-made doom.

(F-points +50! Congratulations, you have unlocked a new point system. Please continue to work hard!)

Fuck!!!!!!!!

Chapter End Notes

Woo! I almost thought I wouldn't be able to manage an update today due to weather, but I did it!!! hope you guys enjoyed the continued story of Oblivious Shen Yuan; what more can he be oblivious about?

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stairs of Qing Jing Peak are made of gray stone. They are smooth and worn down the middle, enough so that when it rains it makes a natural path for the water to follow. They look more natural than the white stone stairs of Qiong Ding Peak; more charming, Yue Qingyuan privately thinks, for he has always been more fond of the grounded peace which Qing Jing Peak inhabits.

Qiong Ding Peak is glorious; it is beautiful and stoic and it mirrors the otherworldly stories which immortal cultivators so often play a role in.

But Qi-Ge grew up on dirt roads. He prefers the gray stone stairs, roughly hewn and smoothed out by passage of time. The way bamboo crowd in clusters at every winding turn, and how there are paths in the grass to the side which show disciples cutting corners.

Shen Yuan is small.

It is a simple fact which Yue Qingyuan finds delightful. The boy is walking beside him, the crown of his head not even reaching the height of Yue Qingyuan's shoulders. He is at that awkward stage children his age enter; limbs gangly and coltish, the clumsy grace of a foal learning to gallop. It is adorable.

Yue Qingyuan knows better than to voice such a thing; Shen Yuan seems less sharp than Xiao-Jiu, not as prone to biting until the other bleeds. But boys his age are proud, and Shen Yuan is clearly shorter than others his age. It is enough to marvel at silently.

Though the cheek the boy showed before had been a delight all on its own. A quip that Shen Yuan had immediately regretted and one which Yue Qingyuan had shamelessly exploited to once more gain a guide he does not need.

He glances at the boy; he catches Shen Yuan staring at Xuan Su. There is curiosity in those familiar eyes. Yue Qingyuan does not put his hand on the sword hilt. It is a habit he has paid much mind to eradicating. He does not think a twelve year old boy can do much harm- but truly, Shen Yuan's stare is intense. It reminds Yue Qingyuan of his childhood. Moments before disaster, a mere blink before Xiao-Jiu acted on whatever impulsive, dangerous thought he had entertained in order to snatch what he wanted from a world too unforgiving. But while the stare is intense, it is the memories of Xiao-Jiu that halts Qi-Ge's hand from hiding Xuan Su from sight.

He instead smiles encouragingly.

"Once your cultivation has advanced, you shall also be chosen by a sword's soul," he says, Shen Yuan looking up at him with wide eyes, "it is a great honor I am sure you will achieve.

However," Yue Qingyuan adds, "one must be patient. A sword does not always pick you on your first attempt."

Shen Yuan glares.

Green eyes narrowing, lips thinning and brows pinching. It is not an intimidating glare. He does not think anyone would fear it. But the existence of it has Yue Qingyuan's heart leap with joy, for the glare is unimpressed and judgemental, not quite biting but close enough.

Truly, Shen Yuan must be Xiao-Jiu's son.

"I know *that,"* Shen Yuan huffs, then flushes a bright red, once again being startled by his own words.

Adorable.

"T-This one apologizes, Shibo," Shen Yuan mumbles, staring everywhere else. Yue Qingyuan can see how his fingers twitch; they are wrinkled and red still from his chores, and yet clearly he wants to cover his face.

Perhaps a fondness for fans is genetic as well, he thinks, amused at his own thoughts.

"This master does not take offense, disciple Shen Yuan," he assures him with a smile, hoping to dispel the anxiety that the boy seems to carry on his shoulders like another set of robes, "this one merely saw you looking at Xuan Su."

Shen Yuan hesitates. They stop walking, lingering on the path. He can see the roof of Xiao-Jiu's bamboo house above them, barely peeking past the hills of Qing Jing Peak. Below, he can see disciple Luo Binghe scrambling up the stairs trying to catch up- he must have finished hanging the laundry as quickly as he could in order to accompany them.

"This one… this one had heard that Shibo does not draw his blade," Shen Yuan says, warily watching Yue Qingyuan in a way that scratches at old memories, "and was… imagining what it looked like. This one is sorry?"

The lilt of a question. Despite the topic of discussion, Yue Qingyuan's lips twitch as he tries to not smile too wide. Xiao-Jiu would have bitten out an accusation rather than an awkward explanation; a demand for answers over an attempt at apology.

"There is no need for an apology. Curiosity is important, and you are a disciple of Qing Jing Peak. Asking questions is what you must do." His smile turns wry as he adds, "the disciples of Wan Jian Peak have done more and asked far less politely than disciple Shen Yuan. Do not worry."

Shen Yuan giggles; it's a hiccup of a laugh, one that seems to have startled him as much as his snark of earlier. Once more he slaps his hands over his mouth and blushes. Yue Qingyuan does not let his eyes move to the bruises peeking past the falling sleeves of the boy's uniform.

He will simply save his questions for Shen Qingqiu.

Instead he turns his head to look at Luo Binghe. The boy's face is flushed from running up the stairs, coming to a stumbling halt mere steps below them.

"This master is capable of finding the one he is looking for now," he says, not missing the slump of relief from Shen Yuan, "I will not hold you any longer, though I am certain Qingqiu-shidi would appreciate the visit."

The disbelief on Shen Yuan's face almost makes him laugh; perhaps it is true that Xiao-Jiu has made no attempt at building a relationship. Or perhaps Shen Yuan isn't immune to the glares that Yue Qingyuan knows aren't half as bad as they seem.

He looks at the boy a moment longer; the bruise on his face from what looks like a wooden sword is one thing. The bruises he glimpsed on his arms- sleeves fully down despite the warm weather and despite having handled chores involving water. That is another clue he does not like.

"Dismissed," he says, and watches fondly as the boys scramble off, Luo Binghe grabbing Shen Yuan's hand as they leave the stairs and cut off into the bamboo forest instead. And then Yue Qingyuan turns around to smile at Shen Qingqiu who steps out from a rock he thinks many disciples must use for hiding.

"Qingqiu-shidi," he greets, stepping closer. He stops a step below, making his dear friend seem taller for once, "is it not a lovely day?"

"Yue Qingyuan," is the furiously hissed reply.

"I truly am here for Peak matters, Qingqiu-shidi," he says, which is mostly true. Xiao-Jiu glowers at him, the folded fan in his hand cracking, and he does not reach for that hand. Yue Qingyuan does not try to make the other man's grasp on it loosen into something relaxed. "Being guided by Shen Yuan was merely a happy coincidence."

If he had not passed the boys by as they hung the laundry, he would not have asked for an escort. That much, at least, was a coincidence.

Xiao-Jiu narrows his eyes at him; even now, he knows Yue Qingyuan too well. The tone of voice that indicates a loophole, a lie by omission. Yue Qingyuan smiles patiently.

"You are *impossible,"* Shen Qingqiu snaps and whirls around. He does not quite stomp up the stairs, but Yue Qingyuan knows the man wants to. He follows and lets his heart swell with fondness.

It is best to let himself do so now, before Xiao-Jiu's words bite at it.

The bamboo house is small and simple. It is not as familiar to him as he wishes it was, but Yue Qingyuan does not stare nor does he look around too overtly. There is always the risk of his eyes lingering too long on a book and Xiao-Jiu taking that as the opportunity to kick him

out.

Instead he stays by the door and watches Shen Qingqiu and him alone.

Shen Qingqiu grumbles, the way he only does inside the house, away from prying eyes. The way he only does when the two of them are truly alone. He flips his fan open then closes again, walking back and forth before he finally stiffly turns to face Yue Qingyuan. Xiao-Jiu's eyes dare him to say anything about his behavior.

"I was visiting An Ding Peak," he says instead, "Shang Qinghua has yet to return from his travels, but there have been concerns lately due to the attempted robbery of Zhao Hua Temple. As we had our meeting a mere two weeks ago, it seemed a good idea to simply visit everyone myself to discuss what possible security breaches there are for each Peak."

Silence settles.

"That's it?"

"The head disciple of An Ding Peak also asked me to ask you for clarification on what wood is needed for the new guqins," he adds, "however, that was merely because I was on my way here."

Xiao-Jiu wrinkles his nose.

"Ask Lie Jiu Peak for assistance. They are far more suited for such things. Or put those brutes at Bai Zhan Peak to work." His words drip with poison, "if they are to be our *warriors,* perhaps their disciples could stand ensuring there are no dangers to begin with. And I shall send An Ding Peak a note on specifications."

He levels a glare at Yue Qingyuan.

"This one would like to be alone now."

Yue Qingyuan hums in reply and very much does not move.

"Yue Qingyuan."

"Qingqiu-shidi."

"This one is noticing that Zhangmen-shixiong has not departed."

"Qingqiu-shidi is very observant. It warms this one's heart."

The fan in Shen Qingqiu's hand cracks.

"Does it appear that I am not a busy man?" he hisses at Yue Qingyuan, "has this one not proved that I am *quite* busy fulfilling my duties? Or does Zhangmen-shixiong think I do nothing but laze about all day?"

Yue Qingyuan does not sigh, though he wants to. Perhaps walking by Shen Yuan had softened memories of the past. Perhaps Yue Qingyuan had foolishly hoped that Xiao-Jiu would not be so eager to bite and claw. Or perhaps he himself should not have used the same teasing on Xiao-Jiu which he used on Shen Yuan.

“Of course not,” he tries to soothe, taking a step forwards, “this one knows that Qingqiu-shidi works hard to fulfill his duties. I merely wished to ask about…”

“We are *not* talking about the child!”

“Xiao-Jiu, I merely–”

“No.”

They stare at each other. Shen Qingqiu is looking very much like a bristling feline, ready to pounce if given enough reason to do so. Yue Qingyuan takes a step back, but his friend does not relax.

Normally, he would leave as told. It is a delicate balance whenever they interact, one Yue Qingyuan often topples by being too eager, too pushy and needy. It is a flaw he can’t seem to get rid of and he tries to compromise by leaving when told to do so.

But Shen Yuan is small and twitchy, with bruises hiding under his uniform sleeves. He looks so very much like Xiao-Jiu.

“This one is merely curious about the nature of disciple Shen Yuan’s bruises,” he says. Shen Qingqiu twitches; eyes narrowing into glares of hardened jade, the change of their dance immediately noticed and disliked. But there was a hint of surprise on his face, a glimpse there and gone.

“What are you implying?” he snaps.

“Nothing,” Yue Qingyuan says, daring to take a step closer once more, “this one implies nothing. Qingqiu-shidi is clearly surprised to hear the nature of my concern.”

“No, Zhangmen-shixiong must clearly think that this one is *incompetent and ignorant* of his *own* Peak,” Shen Qingqiu says in the manner of winter storms, cold and cutting. He steps forward and jabs his fan at Yue Qingyuan’s chest, “first you imply a relationship between that child and I, and now Zhangmen-shixiong is saying this one does not know his own disciples. Or,” he hisses, jabbing the fan again at him, as if it was a knife meant to stab instead, “does Yue Qingyuan imply I personally gave those bruises to that child?”

“This one hopes that is not so.”

But they can both recall past disciples; the ones that made Yue Qingyuan hesitate when Shen Qingqiu picked out Luo Binghe. He does not voice it, but something must show on his face.

Shen Qingqiu grows pale with rage.

“Get off my peak.”

Yue Qingyuan sighs.

“Of course,” he says, and bows his head, “this one wishes you well, Shen Qingqiu.”

“What are F-points?” Shen Yuan asks the system later, when he is curled up under his sixth blanket (he is just going to ignore why he has needed a new blanket *six times,* thanks) and forever grateful that no one can hear him speak to the System. He tested it when he was five years old and lost in a world he had yet to figure out belonged to *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* Small blessings! “What does the *F* stand for?”

(F-points is a brand new point system! The F is inspired by the meme “Press F to Pay Respects”. We are excited for you to try this point system out, specifically tailored to you alone!)

As if anyone else had a System.

Shen Yuan squints at the blue window, glowing softly and casting odd shadows underneath the blanket. He’s pretty sure the F meme was the same as typing L in chat at others. Making fun of them for losing, that kind of stuff. Laughing at other’s pain. Typical gamer stuff.

Well, he had gotten points for being roped into ‘guiding’ Yue Qingyuan again. That *had* been an epic fail, so to speak, and Shen Yuan was really, *really* happy that Yue Qingyuan took mercy on him and let him run off with Luo Binghe before an actual Qing Jing Peak Lord showed up in all his scary, fan-wielding glory. He wonders if they should have stayed behind to make sure Yue Qingyuan himself survived.

“What can I use the points for?” he asks.

(F-points may be used for the same things one uses B-points for but cannot be used without B-points.)

What the fuck did *that* mean???

(If one wishes to use B-points but are lacking to achieve the goal, one could use F-points to reduce the cost.)

“Wait, so it’s like… like a coupon? Use this to get fifty off?” he hisses, “why not just give me

B-points instead? It's the same fucking thing!"

(F-points are acquired through a different method from B-points. B stands for Badass, after all!)

And F was for Losing, or something. Shen Yuan groans and shifts to bury his face in his pillow. He's too tired, he decides then, petty and sore from today's chores, from running into Shen Qingqiu *and* Yue Qingyuan on the *same day.* His fellow disciples have yet to settle down, which means he will have a difficult time falling asleep in time. Things suck.

He will ask the System more in the morning.

Weeks later, he sits in a room filled with awkward music. There are soft murmurs and corrections; the light falling through the windows is golden from the rising sun and warm against his back.

"Here, this string," Shen Yuan whispers to Luo Binghe, leaning over to point at the musical instrument, shoulders bumping,"loosen it a bit, Binghe. Don't be like Cui-shixiong."

He bites back a smile seeing Luo Binghe choke on a barely muffled laugh, and Yuan inches back to his original position. He wouldn't dare to whisper in any of the other classes, but guqin is fine. Shen Qingqiu ignores them at all costs, and Shen Yuan has begun to feel comfortable enough to give advice. The protagonist is talented at many things, but Shen Yuan is happy to say he is still useful to Luo Binghe when it comes to the guqin.

He still looks up to make sure no one is staring- he doesn't want Cui Wenyan to hear what he just said- only to meet familiar green eyes.

Shen Yuan freezes.

Shen Qingqiu looks away, focusing on adjusting Ning Yingying's fingers into the right position, pressing a hand to her shoulder to make her stop bouncing restlessly.

What?

Why was…?

Shen Yuan shakes his head and turns his gaze back to the guqin before him, because it must have been an accident. Shen Qingqiu never looks their way, but sometimes even a Peak Lord makes mistakes.

Yuan rubs at his jaw, where a bruise used to be. It's gone now, faded away days ago, but he had gotten into the habit of poking at it when he had it. There is no pinch of pain. He drops his hand and tries to focus on the music he is meant to play.

He doesn't notice Shen Qingqiu's gaze flickering back to him.

Shen Yuan combs through Luo Binghe's hair with his fingers. It is soft and thick and a little bit coarse, the way curly hair often is. He wants to dig into it; to scratch at Binghe's scalp and tug, just a bit, because there's *so much of it.* He wants to ruffle it and watch the curls bounce, but that would be rude. So he carefully works his fingers through tangled strands and fervently hopes Ning Yingying doesn't catch them.

The sun is setting. It looks like it is resting atop Qiong Ding Peak, a golden orb balancing on the very tip of it. He imagines being able to poke it, send it rolling all the way down to earth.

It's nice.

"Sorry," Shen Yuan mumbles as his fingers accidentally get caught in another tangle.

"I don't mind," Luo Binghe says, sounding drowsily happy. It's a small delight to have discovered that Luo Binghe *loves* having his hair played with. It almost makes Shen Yuan sad that summer is reaching its end.

It's not like his friend will need to get his hair braided once their dormitories stop cosplaying as a lit furnace.

Shen Yuan carefully makes sure to braid it properly; not too tight so that it tugs at the scalp, nor too loose for it to break free during the night. He smiles as Luo Binghe sleepily hums a nursery rhyme of all things.

The protagonist can be truly cute.

"All done," he declares, and Luo Binghe yawns.

"Maybe we could sleep here," Luo Binghe sleepily suggests, and it's tempting. It's still warm enough to do such a thing, and there is not a cloud in the sky. There won't be any rain.

And maybe sleeping outside will be easier than sleeping in the dorms.

Shen Yuan looks towards the hill where he knows the bamboo house hides from view. He remembers how these past months, Shen Qingqiu has kept *looking* at him. Searching for any

weakness, no doubt. In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* he often waited for Luo Binghe to slip up and punished any sign of weakness by stringing him up and giving him a whipping.

Of course, Shen Yuan has done his best to not do that. Sleeping outside would *kinda* ruin it. If nothing else, Ming Fan and his friends would tattle.

It's still tempting.

"No, I like my pillow," he lies, and Shen Yuan gets up.

Or he tries to; his legs are numb from sitting still for too long. He yelps as he tumbles *over* Luo Binghe's shoulder in his attempts to steady himself, who in turn squawks in surprise as well. They blink at each other from where Shen Yuan landed in Luo Binghe's lap.

They both burst into laughter.

Hu Song is one of the older disciples and generally one of the nicer ones. Brown, thick hair tied up in a bun and a nose that's just a tiny bit crooked from a mishap in his youth. When he tells Shen Yuan to do something, one can rest easy because it is an *actual* chore and not the passive aggressive bullying Shen Yuan pretends isn't happening.

He told Shen Yuan to clean out the storage by the kitchens. Dust it off, wipe the shelves and if enough time, reorganize the ceramic jars of fermenting foods into some semblance of order.

The door slams open and Shen Yuan nearly drops one of those jars; it's heavy all by itself, clumsy to handle for a boy of twelve. The lid of it clatters and he flushes, putting the jar down to pick the lid up.

It's kicked out of range, the foot kicking it glancing off of Shen Yuan's reaching hand.

Shen Yuan winces and yanks his hand back; finally, he looks up.

He's not surprised that Ming Fan's friends are there. Zhao De is standing the closest, the culprit of kicking. Cui Wenyan is behind him and there, by the door, is Ming Fan. The storage was already cramped with all its shelves, but their appearance makes the space claustrophobic. Shen Yuan can feel his heart pick up in speed and he carefully stands up. Ming Fan pushes the door closed.

"This one greets Shixiong," Shen Yuan says, cursing his luck.

Did Hu Song set him up? No, that doesn't sound right. They probably just heard from him that Shen Yuan happened to be there.

This is however the most blatant the trio have been up until now.

That is scary, he finds, and Shen Yuan nervously tugs at his sleeves, as if he needs to hide bruises from the ones who gave them to him.

"Are you avoiding us, little shidi?" Zhao De asks, towering over him.

Obviously.

"This one wouldn't dare to be so rude," he mumbles back.

"We haven't seen you for many days now, other than for sleep," Zhao De continues as if he hadn't spoken. Sometimes, Shen Yuan wonders if Ming Fan really is the leader of their group. Zhao De is always the worst one. The *scary* one.

And alright, maybe he had worked *really hard* on avoiding them.

It was just that Shen Qingqiu's eyes seemed to follow him everywhere, and so Shen Yuan did his very best to fade into the background like the meme of Homer Simpson and bushes. The bonus of it had been less of *them!* And Luo Binghe had seemed happier too, the best bonus to ever get!

But if Shen Yuan had known it would result in being cornered in a tiny room with smelly foods?

Nope.

"Speak, mongrel."

Shen Yuan gasps as he's shoved back, back aching from colliding into one of the shelves. The jars rattle ominously and he freezes up. Oh. Oh this is *bad,* he thinks hysterically, feeling his breath shortening, this is a *bad* time to have a little bit of a panic!! Just a *smidge.*

"S-Sorry-"

Another shove.

"Zhao De," Ming Fan says, "careful."

"The bastard has not understood his place, Ming Fan."

"Well, perhaps, but- we don't want to waste food," Ming Fan says. He seems hesitant, eyes traveling over the place, avoiding Shen Yuan. It's tempting to think he's a coward, or maybe has regrets, but he *has* read the novel. Ming Fan truly might be concerned about wasting food. "Don't shove him so hard."

Cui Wenyan shrugs; Zhao De hovers too close still and Shen Yuan doesn't know where to fucking look, his gasps for breath loud in the small room.

"We could blame it on him. He is clumsy," Cui Wenyan suggests.

"It would still be wasted food!" Ming Fan protests, putting his hands on his hips and huffing at them, "Just don't shove him against the shelves!"

"This one understands," Zhao De says and then before Shen Yuan can duck away, the older boy grabs his hair. It *hurts;* a stinging pain that spreads like needles, panic stabbing at his heart, and Shen Yuan doesn't know what sound he makes in response but it *sure is one,* "why do you even bother growing your hair? No parents have claimed you, so there are none to honor. Perhaps we should cut it for you."

Shen Yuan pales.

He clutches at the hand gripping his hair, standing on his tiptoes to lessen the pain. Zhao De gives him a rough shake. It hurts, it *does,* but all he can think of is how his shorn hair would make people ask *questions* and Shen Qingqiu would demand answers and people would *see–!*

"P-Please don't, this- this one will behave, don't- please don't! Shixiong!" he begs, squirming fruitlessly.

"He is sensitive about it," Cui Wenyan points out, "I wonder why?"

"He doesn't even let Ying-shimei touch his hair," Ming Fan adds, coming closer, "always fussing over it. Xiao-shimei only wants to practice her braiding and he won't even let her do such a kindly thing." Ming Fan scoffs. "Ungrateful brat."

"If he is so ungrateful for such gifts, perhaps we truly should cut it! Shear him like a sheep," Zhao De mocks and gives him another shake. He stumbles, nearly trips from it.

The door opens.

They all freeze; they're so crowded close, Shen Yuan can't see who it is.

"What are you three doing?" Hu Song asks in an exasperated tone, "if you are trying to sample food without permission, I must tell Shizun."

Zhao De lets him go. Shen Yuan slumps down, knees weak and breathing rough, and he clutches at his head.

"We only wished to see where Shen-shidi was," Ming Fan explains as they begin to shuffle away, movements awkward in the cramped space, "he is struggling with such heavy duties." They move until Hu Song can see him, and Shen Yuan flinches and averts his gaze.

He knows he must look roughed up; hair a mess and tears stinging at his eyes. Surely it's *obvious* what happened.

"... you shouldn't bother him," Hu Song says, and Shen Yuan dares to glance up, wondering for a moment if maybe, just *maybe* someone else is on his side– "where things might break. Don't cause a mess with rudeness."

Oh.

Hu Song nudges the grumbling trio out of the storage room. His eyes briefly meet Shen Yuan's; they're brown and blank. He doesn't dislike Shen Yuan, nor does he like him. He just doesn't *care.*

That's… that's a weird feeling.

Shen Yuan clutches at his chest as they leave. It takes a long moment for him to calm his heart, to breathe normally once more.

He must not have hidden what happened well enough.

Because Luo Binghe "accidentally" trips Ming Fan, making him land face first in a mud puddle. Shen Yuan bites his lip to stop nervous laughter from spilling out, and his friend's eyes glint even as he offers an almost-sincere sounding apology.

Luo Binghe is told to go and chop wood.

Shen Yuan follows.

The bark is rough against his skin, but Shen Yuan doesn't mind. He and Luo Binghe squeeze together amongst the tree branches where the leaves are thickest. Barely a drop of rain makes it through and truly, it's like the tree was made for just them. The groove in it is just perfect enough for two young boys to huddle close.

The sky is a soft, downy gray.

Luo Binghe is reading out loud, sometimes stumbling over words but getting most of it right. It's amazing how fast he has mastered reading. Shen Yuan listens and chews on melon seeds they pilfered from the kitchen, the tiny bowl carefully balanced in his lap.

From where they sit they can see most of the Peak.

Their tree is mostly hidden away, but only in how it's located. It's high enough to give a good view, but it's so out of the way from everything else that few bother to go there. It's not a *secret* spot. Just a bothersome one, but it's theirs. With the rain, they are guaranteed no interruptions.

He falters in his attention to Luo Binghe when he catches sight of Shen Qingqiu and Ning Yingying.

They are walking towards the dormitories. Shen Qingqiu is holding an umbrella wide enough to cover them both. Ning Yingying is bouncing along him, sometimes tugging on one of his long sleeves as she do her usual chattering. It looks casual.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* Shen Qingqiu had been a creepy pervert towards her. It was something Shen Yuan had worried about at first, but it's been months now and they have begun to move towards autumn. So far, Shen Qingqiu's behavior reminds him more of when he himself was humoring his little sister in his past life than anything else. It's hard to worry anymore, even if the change is a confusing one.

What is it about Ning Yingying that makes Shen Qingqiu favor her?

He's not even so kind towards Ming Fan, who is his head disciple. He seems to ignore most of the disciples of the Peak and only appears to pay attention to the masters his age or older when he has to. So what makes Ning Yingying special? Why does *she* get the attention that most of the Peak thirst for? She's cute and nice, yes, but that can't be it.

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

"Yuan?"

He jumps, then squeaks when he almost lets the bowl of melon seeds tumble down. Luo Binghe uses his almighty protagonist powers to catch it before any seeds fall out.

"Sorry! Sorry," Shen Yuan says, gratefully accepting the bowl back, "did you- I'm sorry." He nervously smooths his hair down and over his neck, then tugs at his clothes to make sure the collar remains high. His scalp sometimes still feels like it stings, but it's getting better. He pushes the thought away.

"It's fine," his friend soothes, lips twitching, clearly trying to not laugh. Shen Yuan glares at him for *daring* to consider it, and that breaks Luo Binghe's composure as he giggles at him. *Giggles!* "I'm sorry, Yuan! It's just… you *squeaked."*

Shen Yuan can feel himself turn bright red.

“I did *not,”* he fruitlessly defends himself.

“You *did.”*

“Nu-huh.”

Luo Binghe giggles again.

Shen Yuan throws a melon seed right at his nose.

Autumn arrives with cold rain and colorful leaves littering the ground like a mulchy carpet of red and orange. Autumn arrives with a harder training schedule, more laps to run and more books to read and scrolls to decipher and–

More bullying.

It has begun to properly spill over onto Luo Binghe. It might be because his friend noticed it happening and spoke up when it happened; it might just be because they’re always together, running all over the Peak to help each other with chores and as such often end up where they both get cornered and shoved.

He needs to put a stop to it, clearly.

“We should tell Shizun,” Luo Binghe says one day. He is gently dabbing at Shen Yuan’s nose, wiping away the blood there. They both got shoved down the slippery stairs after another rainfall, but where Luo Binghe *almost* succeeded in a cool backflip to avoid the worst of it and only ended up with bruises, Shen Yuan had squeaked and landed nose first.

Shen Yuan winces.

“We can’t,” he says, though it comes out all weird. His nose feels stuffy and painful, and Shen Yuan has the really weird, tickling feeling of wanting to sneeze. Which would be bad. The blood splatter would be *insane.*

“Why *not?”* Luo Binghe replies, frustration clear as day, “it’s Shizun! Should he not help us? They are being… cruel! A dishonor to our Peak.”

“Well, um.” Um indeed. Uhhh. “Maybe they will… calm down…?”

He doesn't really know how to tell Luo Binghe that Shen Qingqiu is a Scum villain and probably behind it all. Not that he… *hid it* like he is doing now, in the story. In the story he was very much present during it all. So that's a bit odd. But even if it's odd, that doesn't mean it's a good idea to *tell him.*

"You have bruises *all over,"* Luo Binghe hisses and Shen Yuan feels his cheeks go warm with embarrassment.

"What? *Nooo,* this one does not!"

Luo Binghe leans back and gives Shen Yuan such a disappointed look that he has to shy away from it.

"Maybe a few," he mumbles, then smiles nervously, "are you upset my lie was bad or that I lied at all?"

"I'm upset that you're *hurt,"* Luo Binghe says, which makes Shen Yuan's heart do a warm little wiggle, "and we should tell Shizun."

"Binghe," he whines, then grumbles as Luo Binghe once more presses the rag to his nose, this time letting Shen Yuan handle the responsibility as Luo Binghe begins to smooth out his uniform instead.

"Yuan," Luo Binghe returns in the same whining tone. Shen Yuan swats at him, then nearly drops the rag and decides that maybe, just maybe, he should focus on holding that to avoid more blood stains. He will be the one scrubbing it off, after all. "If we can't tell Shizun, then what shall we do? You could have been truly hurt today." Luo Binghe's eyes narrow, then he says, *"I* could have been hurt today," in the tone of a child saying *Gotcha!!!*

It works.

Shen Yuan slumps, then right himself to lean his head back to stop the blood flow.

"I'm… I'm going to figure something out," he promises, "and! And if I fail, we tell… we can tell Shizun. Does that work? Does that satisfy disciple Luo Binghe?"

"No," his friend says, gently smoothing a hand down Shen Yuan's loose hair, a barely there pressure to his neck. Yuan twitches once, briefly, before he forces himself to relax. It's Binghe. He already knows, has already seen. It's fine. "But Yuan is so stubborn."

Shen Yuan smiles, even though it makes his nose sting.

"Thank you," he softly says, and Luo Binghe's small, helpless smile is a relief to see. Yuan's fingers twitch with the urge to touch it, just once. Which he shouldn't. Because that's weird.

“System,” he says that night, scratching at his neck, sitting up in bed with his back to the wall, “how do I get more F points?”

It is the middle of the night. The pale light of the moon casts beams of dark blue against the darkness of the sleeping quarters. There is nothing but the sound of soft snuffling and the occasional snore. From where he sits, Shen Yuan can see Luo Binghe nuzzle into his pillow. He can see Ning Yingying kick her leg like a restless toddler.

(F-points are acquired by increasing your relationship status with people of Authority in a positive manner.)

Shen Yuan blinks, then squints at the System. He rereads it once, twice, tired brain working through the insomnia.

Wait. What.

Wait. *Wait. WAIT.*

“Are you telling me I have to become a teacher's pet?” he hisses into the night, then points an accusing finger at the status window, “that has *nothing* to do with that meme! What the hell! F to pay respect to my ASS!”

(Press F to Pay Respect was an inspiration for the name. F can stand for many things. F! F! F! Good luck!)

“No! No, that’s bullshit!” he protests, then forces his voice lower because even if no one can hear him, it still feels *bad* to yell at night. Like some weird illegal activity, like… like walking barefoot in a big city. “Who can I even earn points with?”

He hasn’t seen Yue Qingyuan on the Peak in *months* now, to the point he had been half-convinced that the Lord was murdered by Shen Qingqiu. He never sees more than glimpses of the other Peak Lords when they stop by to exchange quick words with the Scum villain. There is no one to try and get on good terms with, no possible way to quickly gain F points.

And B points are near impossible to gain these days. There’s nothing badass about being bullied or watching the protagonist be bullied right next to you. And then said protagonists wants them to go and tattle to Shizun, as if that has *ever* helped *anyone* and–

Oh.

Shen Yuan stares blankly at the System.

In the novel, Shen Qingqiu was an active participant.

Right now, he wasn’t.

The only difference was Shen Yuan. The mini-scum villain, the one everyone pretended wasn’t related but *totally was.*

“I’m going to become a teacher’s pet,” he whispers.

Shen Yuan shudders.

Chapter End Notes

and so it begins :D

also that feel when you planned a short YQY & SQQ scene but YQY was too busy internally adoring his beloved Xiao-Jiu that it was near impossible to end it. anyway I love YQY. he's a hilarious and tragic character but then again who isn't in svsss??

Thanks for reading!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes, the clouds leave the sky to rest upon the peaks of Cang Qiong Mountain.

Of course it is simply mist; Shen Yuan laughed the first time Luo Binghe said it was the clouds taking a nap, before he worried that Luo Binghe actually believed it to be so. He had briefly scrunched up his nose, stopped only to instead bite at his bottom lip, tugging at his earlobe as he worried about how to tell Luo Binghe that he was being dumb without hurting his feelings.

He had looked relieved and guilty when Luo Binghe assured him that *of course* he knew that it was simply mist and not actual clouds. As if he worried that Luo Binghe would take offense that he, for but a few moments, thought Luo Binghe didn't know better.

Shen Yuan worries a lot.

The morning mist makes the sun fuzzy around the edges. It is thick, blurring everything close and hiding everything afar. It gives the Peak a dreamlike feeling, as if there is nothing out in the world except *this.* Their Peak and nothing else. That if they stepped onto the Rainbow Bridge, it would simply drop them down into emptiness. Luo Binghe doesn't mind.

When the mist embraces Qing Jing Peak, Shen Yuan holds his hand.

"Are you worried I will be lost?" he asks cheekily, squeezing Yuan's hand. It makes Shen Yuan blush, but it doesn't make him let go.

"Of course not! I, however, would be," his friend says, side-eyeing the gently rustling bamboo with distrust. In the mist, it looks otherworldly and a little bit spooky.

Luo Binghe watches him.

When they first met, Shen Yuan had reminded him of the stray kittens he often saw in villages. A wet and bedraggled little thing, more skin and bones than anything else, sneaking closer to catch a bit of warmth and hoping to avoid a kick to the side. His green eyes had been so *big* in that gaunt face.

He had been pitiful and Luo Binghe had let him come closer because of it.

Of course, there had been nothing pitiful about him. It hadn't taken long for Luo Binghe to realize that the scared kitten had a clever mind and a lilted smile that hid shy mischief. He had taught Luo Binghe how to spell his name by scratching it into the dirt and was fascinated as Luo Binghe showed him how to keep the fire alive. He had made sly little comments about the nobles camped nearby, the kind of comments that would have had them both whipped if

overheard.

After a mere day of knowing him, Luo Binghe had thought that if they were not both accepted into the sect, one may very well not bother joining it.

Now Shen Yuan's cheeks are flushed and rounded instead of gaunt and pale. His eyes have gained a spark to them despite the way Zhao De and his friends treat them. His hair is neat, always carefully pulled back in a low tail to ensure it covers his thin neck, but black and shiny with health.

The way his green eyes narrow still reminds Luo Binghe of cats.

He doesn't understand why their Shizun won't acknowledge him. He has seen the glances Shen Qingqiu keeps sending them when Shen Yuan doesn't notice; they are difficult to read, but Luo Binghe doesn't think they're hostile. It's why he is certain that if they just *tell him,* their Shizun will put a stop to the things Zhao De's group come up with. Shen Qingqiu is lofty and Immortal, and while he rarely speaks to them he surely must want his students to thrive! And he clearly has *some* thoughts on Shen Yuan, thoughts he may very well voice if they just ask him.

But Shen Yuan is stubborn.

"I would find you, if I lost you," he tells Yuan, "but I wouldn't lose you to begin with, I promise."

Yuan rolls his eyes but he smiles, so it doesn't matter. Luo Binghe grins and bumps their shoulders together. He is happy that Shen Yuan is his first friend, his *only* friend. Together, they will one day rise so high no one will ever push them around again. Even if Yuan seems scared of the attention that would require- that's fine. Luo Binghe will protect him.

He may be struggling with his cultivation, but they will get there. He's sure of it, *sure* that their friendship will carry them through any tribulations. Just like the stories his mother told him.

"This fog is ridiculous, I'm expecting pyramid heads to just… pop out," Shen Yuan says. Then, before Luo Binghe can ask what a pyramid head is, he adds; "do you know where Ning-Shijie is? I need to speak with her."

Luo Binghe blinks.

Ning Yingying is a friendly girl, and maybe in a different world he would have considered her a friend of his own. She is not as delicate with others as Yuan is, always fumbling a bit but she doesn't mean any harm. However Yuan always brings her up at the oddest times, usually in some strange attempt to make Luo Binghe befriend her which is… one of the few annoying habits Yuan has.

Mostly though, her carefree behavior always makes Yuan *twitch.*

It's a barely there thing, gone in a blink. But when her cheerful voice calls for *A-Yuan,* there is that twitch, the barely noticeable way he tries to shrink. There is the way he half-flinches when she makes too quick movements, swatting at him, tugging on his arm and curiously playing with his hair until Luo Binghe can shove himself between them and say something, anything to make her back off without making it a whole thing because Yuan *hates* the attention such things bring.

It's not only her. He has seen Yuan react to others in similar ways, most often women, and it's so strange that Yuan seems more fearful of those people than Zhao De, Ming Fan and Cui Wenyan ever makes him.

Luo Binghe is curious and wants to *ask* about it. But sometimes his friend truly embodies that stray kitten from their first meeting. He is afraid that if he ever asks, Shen Yuan might just bolt and never return.

The point is that Yuan never sought out Ning Yingying first.

"Why?" he dares to ask, gently tugging Yuan away from a loose rock in the path, keeping an eye out for any troublemakers approaching, people ready to use the loose rock as an excuse to trip them.

He will protect Shen Yuan.

It… is difficult, sometimes, because they are much smaller than the older disciples and the teachers turn a blind eye to inner disputes. Shen Yuan's flighty behavior and green eyes that never hide his feelings attracts the bullies like honey lures flies. Luo Binghe knows that every time he is told to go and chop wood, it is simply so that Zhao De and his friends can harass Shen Yuan without him getting in the way. Because Yuan gets *scared,* but there's also always that stubborn glint in his eyes that delights Luo Binghe and, he suspects, drives Zhao De absolutely *mad* with anger.

Ning Yingying can't help with that.

"Shizun likes her," Yuan explains. He moves his hand to scratch his cheek, not paying any mind to how he still has Binghe's in his grasp. Once he scratches, he drops them both back down to their sides. Binghe smiles, and squeezes. Yuan absently squeezes back, "so… I thought, if I am to tell Shizun the way you *want me to,* I will have to first make sure Shizun likes *me.* So I'm going to ask her for advice."

He says it like it makes any sense at all.

"Because you're so unlikeable all on your own?" Luo Binghe asks, voice dry as sand, because has Yuan ever *listened* to himself? At twelve years old he is already far more clever and interesting than most disciples at fifteen and older.

"Shizun will think so. I'm sure of it."

“Shizun will make you head disciple and kick Ming Fan off the Peak,” Binghe counters, and laughs as Shen Yuan blushes bright red and shoves him away.

Ning Yingying’s ribbons of the day are a bright green. It looks like she somehow peeled bamboo and turned it into silk, and the ends of them catch and flutter in the wind.

Shen Yuan stops and looks at her for a moment.

She has her back turned to him, so he can get away with it. She’s sitting on the grass, hunched over what he *thinks* is her carving a flute- she spoke about it a few days ago- and so he takes the time to… *prepare* himself. She’s just so difficult, sometimes, because she’s nice and sweet and *yet–*

And usually he just relies on Luo Binghe to handle it! He has a good hand with her, as expected since she becomes one of his top three wives who *actually* seems to care for him. And Binghe seems to just know, somehow, that Shen Yuan maybe doesn’t *like* people crowding so close and being so in his face. That, or maybe the protagonist is jealous? Not that he should be. Shen Yuan is *not* interested in Ning Yingying. However, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that he has to speak to Ning Yingying by himself.

“A-Yuan?”

He shakes himself out of it.

“Shijie,” he greets, and Shen Yuan steps closer, “is all well?”

Her brown eyes blink at him before they light up with a bright, charming smile. Ning Yingying happily pats the ground next to her and Shen Yuan gingerly sits down. He has to brush away pieces of wood from her carving attempts first, but there’s not much to worry about. Most of it has ended up in her lap.

“Shidi! Oh, I’m very well, look how much progress I’ve made!” Ning Yingying gushes, showing off the flute. It’s starting to *look* like one, he can admit that.

“It looks nice,” he compliments.

“Thank you! Where’s A-Luo? Is he alright?” She frowns, put upon, “is he doing chores now?”

It’s now his turn to blink at her.

“Um,” he says, “what do you mean?”

She’s right, of course. Luo Binghe had been shoved off to chop more wood- do they ever run out of wood to chop? Where does it all come from??? - but the way she says it is so pointed that he feels like he missed a step.

“Well, he’s always with you and when he isn’t, it’s because he’s doing chores! And you two get so *many* chores, it’s like bullying! Actually,” she decides, puffing up, “it *is* bullying! Shixiong is so cruel to you both. I’ll tell Shizun, don’t worry! Come, we should do it together, he will for *sure* tell them to stop and–!”

Shen Yuan grabs her shoulder and pushes her back down before she can get up, and at her startled look he flushes and snatches his hand back.

“Sorry! Sorry,” he apologizes, tugging at his sleeves, “I just- this one would not want to trouble Shizun?” he tries, even though he is kind of maybe *possibly* here to figure out *how* to best trouble Shen Qingqiu. “It is such small things! But, you know. Speaking of Shizun and all! What uh. What does he like?”

Ning Yingying tilts her head. Her ribbons almost whack him in the eye as the wind turns, and Ning Yingying swats them away from him.

“What do you mean, A-Yuan?”

He winces, then thinks about it. Shen Yuan knows he could make up some lie, but does he actually need to? Ning Yingying is a lot, but she’s not someone who would tattle on *them.* On Ming Fan and his cronies, yes, but not on Luo Binghe. And maybe not even on Shen Yuan. She seems to like him, which is nice. He *wants* people to like him, especially the future wives of Binghe. With that in mind, he decides to take the chance on honesty.

To a certain degree.

“I want to make a good impression on him. He… doesn’t speak much to me, or Binghe. And he likes you! You seem very close,” Shen Yuan says, watching her smile happily at the reminder, “So you must surely know what he likes?”

“Oh, Shizun likes honesty,” she tells him, which *what.* That can’t be right. “And he likes the color green and his fans, of course, and he’s so very good at music and poetry!”

Shen Yuan had doubts about the color green. That was the color of their uniforms, was she basing it on that? What color their Shizun wears the most? *Really?*

Hey, System, would he earn points on this? Listening to nonsense? This was the most unhelpful advice he had ever received!

“I don’t know how that could help me,” he admits pitifully, and does not flinch when she pats his shoulder.

“That’s alright! I’ll help!”

Hm.

Shen Yuan stares at Ning Yingying’s beaming face and her round, rosy cheeks and fluttering ribbons and the way she is carelessly using the carving knife to gesture as she begins to speak of all the many, many things which Shizun apparently likes.

He feels like he might have made a mistake.

Shen Yuan thinks he might be thirteen now.

When he first opened his eyes and realized the world was different with its low buildings and dirt roads, it was Autumn. He can’t remember the exact date, of course, and the System only told him it was Autumn at the time. Not the specific *day.* But he thinks he might be thirteen.

He’s older than Luo Binghe by a few months. That’s a little bit funny, because Shen Yuan is unfortunately short in comparison to other kids their age, and being older than Luo Binghe seems like a bit of a joke. He tries to imagine Binghe calling him something like Yu-ge or Gege and has to bite back a laugh.

And then he imagines calling the future Demon Lord *Xiao-Luo* or even just *Shidi* and has to take a breather, face red and hiding behind his hands as Binghe leans in with his dark eyes wide in concern. And he can’t tell him that the whole idea just seems *wrong,* because he has learned that Binghe is a shit stirrer at the worst of times and he would just gleefully begin to call Shen Yuan “Shixiong” and he can’t have the future Demon Lord call him *Shixiong.*

No, best to not tell Binghe that he might be the older one.

Since Ning Yingying is an unreliable advice giver, Shen Yuan decides to sit back and observe instead. He wishes he had a clipboard, or some kind of leaderboard or achievement list. He thinks that the System *should* be able to just pop one into the corner of his eye and tells it as much, but all he gets is a cheerful °･✧ヽ(⁰▽⁰)ノ✧･° in response.

Fuck you, he thinks furiously, twitchy with nerves as this is the closest he's come to interacting with Shen Qingqiu in ages.

Shen Yuan is sitting on a stone bench, pretending to read a book on The Rainbow Birds of Paradise, which he has already read of course and as such know that the birds are basically ostriches in multicolor that somehow live in the mountains to the north. Which is why it's a good thing to pretend-read, because he won't actually get distracted.

He peeks over the edge of it.

Shen Qingqiu is listening to some older disciples, fan up but standing in such a way that Shen Yuan can catch sight of his mouth. He looks ice cold as always, green robes fluttering because it's *always* windy up on Qing Jing Peak. Probably because it's a literal mountain peak. Shocker!

He does look a little bit cool. The air has begun to grow colder as Autumn progresses, but today there is at least sunlight and a bright blue sky. It casts the Peak Lord with an almost holy light, his hair black as ink and kind of looking like someone painted it with an elegant swirl of a brush as it flows in the wind.

And there- Ning Yingying comes bouncing up, orange ribbons and a giddy smile on her face when Shen Qingqiu's eyes briefly settle on her. There's a twitch of a smile behind the fan before he focuses back on the older disciples and their…

Wait.

Shen Yuan snaps his eyes to the older disciples.

Are they talking about waste disposal?

Why are they talking about *shit?* Isn't that An Ding's job??? How do they have the courage to talk about *shit* to Shen Qingqiu???? Wait, is it job of each Peak's disciples to handle waste disposal? Oh wow maybe Ming Fan has been going easy on him with the chores. Or not? What the fuck are these guys saying? It seems like it *is* An Ding Peak, but if so, why…

Shen Yuan stares at them in disbelief as he listens.

"– and so, this humble one thought that perhaps it would become a good exercise for our younger disciples if we instead have them take care of such things rather than a different Peak. It would strengthen their minds and prevent unfortunate conflicts with An Ding Peak disciples–"

"Is that why you smell so bad?" Ning Yingying blurts out.

The disciple who had been speaking falters.

"... excuse me?"

“Did someone from An Ding make you trip in it?” Ning Yingying asks, cheerfully curious, not a single mean bone in her body. She truly only wants to *know.* Shen Yuan listens, fascinated, as she unknowingly murder a man. “That’s so sad! And you haven’t even had time to wash yourselves after because you still smell so bad!”

The disciples stare helplessly at her. Their hair is wet, so they clearly have just been washing themselves. But the smell must linger, which now has led them down the path of accidental humiliation by the Peaks’ beloved Shimei. In front of their Shizun.

And Shen Qingqiu, behind his fan, is *smiling.*

It’s not a very nice smile. It’s not wide, either, and doesn’t show any teeth. But there’s glee in it, a deep amusement which Shen Yuan remembers seeing his own older brother wear whenever his younger siblings did something terribly embarrassing, like recording a tiktok dance and fucking up a step and landing face first and- *anyway that totally only happened to his little sister.*

He didn’t even know Shen Qingqiu *could* smile.

The fake cultivation manual doesn’t look fake.

It is worn down where it should be; old and taken care of, as if it truly is a precious heirloom. The things it says sound reasonable to an untrained eye. If Shen Yuan was not a transmigrator who knew the truth, he thinks he may very well have been fooled by it and let his Cultivation slide backwards where Luo Binghe is taking one forceful step at a time against a raging river of misinformation.

He wonders how many people have read it; how many generations of Qing Jing Peak disciples have been fooled by the knowledge it so freely gives. Has it always been used for malicious purposes, or was there a point in time where people actually believed in it?

Shen Yuan frowns down at it.

He truly wants to throw it away. But he doesn’t dare to, not yet. He needs to figure out what Shen Qingqiu’s deal is first.

So when Luo Binghe asks for it, he very reluctantly hands it over and wishes he had come with the knowledge of *how* cultivation works in this world. He wishes he could just tell Luo Binghe of better ways.

But he is thirteen.

His heart is going to beat out of his ribcage.

Shen Yuan wants to clutch at his chest, to make sure that if his heart does break free, he can at least catch it. Instead he tugs at his sleeves, shuffling closer as Ming Fan moves away, ignoring the confused glare sent his way from the head disciple.

Shen Yuan comes to a stop before Shen Qingqiu.

The Peak Lord looks at him. His face is cold and blank, his hands still on the guqin before him. Behind him, Shen Yuan can see Ning Yingying putting away her own instrument as she takes curious peeks at them over her shoulder.

“Shizun,” Shen Yuan says, forcing himself to meet the eyes that resemble his own so much. It lets him see how they briefly widen, a barely there twitch of change before it smoothes back out, “this one would like to ask why Cui Wenyan is still allowed a guqin.”

Shen Qingqiu blinks.

Behind Shen Yuan, the sound of movement abruptly halts. He knows there’s not only Luo Binghe, but also Cui Wenyan himself. He knows this might very well bite him in the ass. But he remembers Shen Qingqiu smiling as Ning Yingying blundered her way into conversation.

Shen Yuan can’t do that; he knows he lacks the rude yet oblivious sweetness of Ning Yingying, and he can’t believably simper the way Ming Fan does. He needs to find his very own brand of teacher’s pet.

Sometimes one has to take a risk to get the hidden reward.

Shen Qingqiu tilts his head.

“This master would like to know the nature of this inquiry,” he says.

“Shixiong’s guqin always loses its strings,” Shen Yuan says, feeling as if his heart has given up on breaking through his chest and is instead attempting to travel up his throat. There is a big clump he has to speak around, hoping desperately he doesn’t sound choked nor that his voice will crack under the stress, “and it seems a shame for Shixiong to waste his time on an instrument that he does not flow with, and for the instrument to suffer in hands not meant for it.”

Was that too much? Shit, it was too much, wasn't it?

"All disciples must learn qin," the Peak Lord replies after a moment, the silence of the room making his voice ring out clearly, "however unfit they may be." There's a twist to his lilted mouth, something that Shen Yuan can't read. "But disciple Cui could do well with returning to the foundation. This master is growing tired of his inability to treat his guqin with respect."

Finally those sharp eyes turn away from Shen Yuan. He takes the moment to breathe as Shen Qingqiu focuses on Cui Wenyan.

"From now, for every string that breaks under your hands, five laps shall be added to your morning run," he says and wow. Wait. *Wow.*

Considering how many strings Cui Wenyan snaps, that is a lot.

"Shizun!" Cui Wenyan tries to protest, but the snap of a fan is enough to make him fold, a mumbled *yes Shizun* replacing what may have become an argument. Shen Yuan tugs at his sleeves, down until even his fingertips are hidden from view.

Shen Qingqiu looks back at him.

They stare at each other. Shen Yuan wonders if the man is also taking note of how similar they are. Is he able to pick out traces of a mother that Shen Yuan can't remember? They look so much alike, but there *are* differences. For a brief, insane moment he almost asks.

"Was that all?" Shen Qingqiu asks, bringing his fan up to cover his mouth.

The fan of the day is the warm color of old paper. There are mountain peaks painted over it. Not the twelve peaks of Cang Qiong Mountain, but a mountain nevertheless. Trees hunched in an imaginary wind and birds flying across the sky.

"I like your fan," he blurts out, and slaps a hand over his mouth.

Behind their Shizun, Ning Yingying smiles brightly and gives him two thumbs up. Blatantly obvious, and in the corner of his eye he can see Ming Fan's face turn red with anger next to where he stands to a downcast Cui Wenyan. Shen Yuan thinks he might very well die and it won't even be his fault this time!

Shen Qingqiu stares at him over the fan. He looks startled, which is fair. He is startled by himself, damn it, and he half-expects Shen Qingqiu to order him whipped for disrespect.

The silence grows longer. Shen Yuan dares not drop his hand, terrified of what other nonsense he might sprout if he does.

Shen Qingqiu stands and it takes everything in Shen Yuan to not flinch.

"It is a good one," Shen Qingqiu stiffly says, "you may put aside this one's guqin for today."

And with that he turns and leaves in a swirl of green robes, leaving the classroom of befuddled disciples behind.

Shen Yuan goes to do as told, feeling dazed.

(+20 F points! Congratulations!)

Their tree still has leaves.

They have begun to turn in color; golden yellow and bright red crowd together, a flurry of colors that sometimes drifts down to cover the ground around it in a patchy carpet. It's a bright spot against the green of bamboo, like a bonfire amongst jade.

He wonders what it will look like in winter; imagining the tree without leaves is a strange thing, because it is a mighty crown of foliage that has sheltered them from many rainfalls. But perhaps it won't even shed all of its leaves. Shen Yuan remembers reading about how some flora and fauna changed when exposed to qi. He has heard that the animals which Xi Jiao Peak houses are sometimes strange in appearance and behavior, living too long when allowed to roam free. A tree growing on Cang Qiong Mountain may very well never enter the slumber which winter brings.

Of course, if *that* was true, it shouldn't change colors at all.

"What was that?" Luo Binghe asks once they're alone at their tree, fussing over Shen Yuan's hands. He had been clenching them so hard his nails dug into his palms, enough to leave indents even now. There is no balm to apply, no blood to wipe off. Luo Binghe can only hold his hands and frown down at the marks on them.

"What was what?" Shen Yuan tries, but Luo Binghe's eyes are dark and imploring, a pout threatening to appear on his lips. Shen Yuan folds. "I have a theory? On, um, on how to get Shizun to like me?"

It sounds weak to his own ears and makes little sense. He squirms, the ground cold these days, but Luo Binghe refuses to let him climb up the tree after what he did to his own hands.

Please, Binghe! It doesn't even hurt that much!

"A theory? That makes Cui Wenyan angrier? And Ming Fan looked angry as well! And Zhao De…" Luo Binghe scowls, squeezing Shen Yuan's hands in his. "This one is not leaving your side for *days,"* he says like a threat, "they will hunt Yuan for sport."

Alright, fair point and something Shen Yuan had kind of hoped to ignore.

“Ning-Shijie is rude,” he blurts out before Luo Binghe can work himself up into a truly impressive rant, “but not on purpose! Right? And- I saw Shizun smile, once, when she was being rude to other disciples. Not on purpose, I mean. So I thought maybe Shizun likes it when you’re being… inconvenient? To others?”

Luo Binghe sits back, letting go of Shen Yuan’s hands. He stares at Shen Yuan with that expression of his. The one where he is trying to make sense of things. Usually it only happens when Shen Yuan slips up and accidentally says something from his previous life. Sometimes, though rarely, when he is trying to figure out a sentence in a book before he folds and asks for help with a shy smile.

It pushes Shen Yuan into explaining more.

“I can’t do what Ming Fan does,” he says, looking down at his hands to avoid that gaze, so piercing even at twelve years old, “I can’t… *simper.* And I’m not as sweet and likable as Ning-Shijie. But I know things, and I know how to be polite. So I thought if I point out what others do wrong so that Shizun has an excuse to punish them… I mean, he seems to like punishing others.”

“He is strict,” Luo Binghe agrees, “But you are sweet and likable too. More, even, than Ning-Shijie.”

“Binghe!” he whines, jerking his head up to glare at his friend, “that’s not what a boy wants to hear! What if I said you were such things to Ning-Shijie?”

Luo Binghe just looks at him. Shen Yuan huffs.

“The point is! I’m going to be a know-it-all but I’m going to be polite about it,” he says, looking away and rubbing one hand against a warm cheek, “and Shizun didn’t seem mad this time, so I think it’s working.”

“Does… that is. Did you speak with Ning-Shijie before this?”

“Hm? Well, of course” Shen Yuan replies, looking back at Luo Binghe, “I did say I needed her advice.” Surely Luo Binghe, a strategic mastermind, could see the value of such things? Sure, they are both still children, but Luo Binghe’s story has been shaped since his birth. He is clever and good at grasping for what he needs to achieve his goals.

Luo Binghe *pouts.*

What!!! What is there to pout about???

“Binghe?”

“This one saw her behind Shizun’s back,” his friend says, *still pouting,* “Ning-Shijie was very encouraging towards Yuan. This one wonders why I was not told as well?”

Oh. Oh! Oh, that was cute. Shen Yuan smiles at him, amused. The protagonist was *jealous.* Whereas Ming Fan turned red with it, Luo Binghe pouted. That was very cute, though unbefitting of the protagonist.

“Ning-Shijie’s encouragement was unwanted,” he assures Luo Binghe, reaching to give his braid a tug from where it hangs over his shoulder. It’s not very long yet, but he knows that Luo Binghe’s hair will grow thick and lush. In the story, he used to pin it back. It’s kind of nice, seeing Shen Yuan’s braids in his hair instead.

Thank you, little sister, for demanding braids! Thank you, video tutorials, for showing him the way!

“If Shizun had turned and seen her do such things, this one would definitely be in trouble. You needn’t worry about me taking up Ning-Shijie’s attention! I don’t want it.”

The pout turns into a relieved smile. Shen Yuan huffs a laugh and gives the braid another tug before he leans back.

“I want to know about these things in the future,” Luo Binghe says, shuffling until he sits next to Shen Yuan instead of in front of him. They lean back against their tree, the leaves drifting down as the wind rustles the branches above them, “so that I can help you.”

“It’s alright,” he tells Binghe, ignoring the alert for B points, though secretly happy he is gaining some *finally.* This must be a sign that they’re on the right path. It’s been a drought of points until now, “you don’t need to. Besides, you already said we shouldn’t be parted for now, didn’t you?”

“Because they will hunt you for sport, yes.”

“So that means I can’t leave you out of my evil plans,” Shen Yuan decides, and Luo Binghe laughs.

“Yuan is not evil!”

“Well, I could be! Are you not the one always saying we can do anything? I can be evil! I *will* be!” He has the genes for it! Scum Villain 0.2! That’s what.

Luo Binghe snorts. Shen Yuan mock-gasps and pushes at him, and soon they’re both giggling as they try to swat at each other.

Later, once they have calmed down and the sun is beginning to set below the misty peaks of Cang Qiong Mountain, Luo Binghe looks at him in a way that has his heart squirm. He stares back, pausing in his attempt to braid grass blades together.

“Could I braid your hair sometime?” Luo Binghe asks.

Shen Yuan pauses mid motion. His heart stutters, and he thinks his face grows slack with

shock. It shouldn't be. It's a nice thing to ask; it's polite. It's friendly. He braids Binghe's hair all the time. They're friends. It's fine.

And yet, his heart stutters in his chest and it feels like there's ice in his lungs.

"Um," he chokes out, dropping the messy braid of grass. It drifts to his lap, immediately forgotten as he tugs on his sleeves, "I- I, um. I don't… I don't think that braids would suit me."

"You have longer hair than I do," Binghe cautiously says, "you often complain. I thought… if we do get cornered by Zhao De and his friends, it might be nice to not have it in the way?"

That's logical. Shen Yuan bites at his lip.

"Is it your neck?"

Shen Yuan startles, slapping a hand over his nape; not realizing he had looked away from Luo Binghe, he immediately flicks his gaze back up to meet the dark eyes of his friend. There's a worried furrow between his brows, and Luo Binghe is leaning in closer. Shen Yuan has the bizarre and conflicting urges of leaning in and stumbling away. He sits frozen instead.

"What?"

"Does it hurt? Is that why you don't want your hair touched? Because your neck hurts?"

Shen Yuan shakes his head. It doesn't hurt, no.

Luo Binghe stares at him, then reaches for him. He pauses before touching. Perhaps he can see how Shen Yuan suddenly can't look away from his hands. Perhaps he sees something that Shen Yuan *tries* to hide away, all the time, because the protagonist wouldn't want someone *weak* to be his friend.

"Can I hold your hand, Yuan?" his friend asks, and it takes a long moment before Shen Yuan manages a nod. Luo Binghe doesn't reach for the hand he still has clasped over the back of his neck. Instead he reaches for the one in Shen Yuan's lap, nails digging into his palm once more.

"It's… I trust you," he gets out as Luo Binghe pries his hand open, rubbing at the indents from the nails, "I do."

"Is it your hair or neck?"

Always so clever, Binghe.

"... hair," he admits in a whisper.

They sit there for a while; holding hands until Shen Yuan manages to remove his hand from

his neck in slow, halting motions. They sit until their curfew nears, and even then Luo Binghe has to coax him to stand. He focuses on holding his friend's hand as they take the winding path to the dorms, pushing away the stupid, stupid guilt of not being able to let Binghe touch his stupid *hair*.

Shen Yuan misses the considering look Luo Binghe sends the bamboo house. He remains oblivious as Luo Binghe becomes determined.

Sleep is, as always, a struggle.

Chapter End Notes

I thought ao3 wouldn't let me update today haha :D stress!

The next chapter might be a bit late, pls be warned. I will try my best to update next monday as well but just in case, now you know <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frost covered the grass upon Qing Jing Peak. The slow rising sun was peeking through wisps of clouds to cast its light, causing the frost to glimmer like shattered glass.

Shen Qingqiu watches as his disciples train.

It is a simple routine he takes no pleasure in and one which he would prefer to ignore all together. One morning every fifth day, he attends and lets the disciples of Qing Jing Peak show what they have learned. As the Lord, he is expected to praise or punish depending on what they show. Most often there are laps to run, though he can't help but offer fond praise for Ning Yingying even as she stumbles gracelessly.

In the far back, there is the Child and his tag-along.

They struggle to keep up with the routine. Shen Qingqiu does not let his eyes linger on them, though he often looks their way without moving his head. He watches as the Child flushes upon a misstep, sees how the boy quickly glances around to ensure none saw before he resumes.

The child has black hair, tied in a low tail with a simple ribbon. His eyes are green much like Shen Qingqiu's, a dimple by his mouth when he smiles at his *friend.* He looks enough like Shen Qingqiu to make it impossible to stifle the rumors of their relationship.

Shen Jiu hated far too many people and far too many things.

Shen Qingqiu still does.

Weakness is one of the things he hates the most, a fact which he can freely admit. The Child is weak. He has seen the Child shy away from the older disciples, and though he himself has never *seen* anything he knows how Qing Jing Peak works. It is a Peak of bullies, of hierarchy. The nobles and their prey. It is a hassle he had to conquer and now he stands tall amongst those who used to trouble him.

The Child is weak.

Yue Qingyuan would want to smother the Child with useless things, with comfort that would soften him, with knowledge that would be of no use in the world around them. He seethes at how Yue Qingyuan always wishes to speak of the Child when they meet outside the Peak. Idiotic attempts at a connection that was severed the night he struck down Wu Yanzi, useless words to tug at the Shen Jiu of the past.

He should know better. They both grew up on the same streets, dragged from town to town,

watching children be traded for coins. Yue Qingyuan should *know better.*

“Well done,” Shen Qingqiu says as the disciples come to a stop, and they beam at him as if it is great praise indeed. He keeps his face blank and scoffs on the inside. “You are dismissed.”

They bow; they leave, trudging off to their duties. He watches as Ming Fan, Cui Wenyan and Zhao De clump together, muttering as they throw looks towards The Child. The Child, who is scuttling over towards him, resolutely ignoring the looks he must notice. The Child and his tag-along, the one who is glaring daggers at the trio of miscreants, as if glaring alone will protect the Child from bullying.

Shen Qingqiu flicks his fan open and does not move as the Child comes to a stop before him, offering a bow of respect.

“This one greets Shizun,” the Child says, and Shen Qingqiu does not whack him with the fan, though his fingers tightens where he grasps it.

“Disciple Shen Yuan,” he replies, words stiff.

The Child looks up, and he feels nothing but distaste. Those eyes so much like his own are too big, too soft, too eager. The tag-along shuffles next to him, scruffy looking where the Child is small and weak. Shen Qingqiu has not paid much attention to the pair since he took them into the sect. He should have.

Shen Qingqiu does not greet the little beast.
He keeps his eyes on Shen Yuan alone.

“This one had a question for Shizun,” the Child dares, and he wonders what it will be this time. Cui Wenyan’s musical skills have been dragged through the dirt. Ming Fan’s organization system has been criticized and improved. Hu Song has been proven unreliable for his previous duties and demoted to more gruesome work. The past weeks have been… interesting.

Shen Qingqiu will admit to one thing and only that; Shen Yuan is weak, but the Child is certainly doing *something* these days.

It is far too convoluted. Too many steps, dragged out and never quite put together. There is nothing quick and neat about it. He is not reaching for hair pins to stab with, he is not framing his bullies for minor crimes and neither is he wielding stolen information like a weapon. He relies far too much on his tag-along, their affection for each other too known, a vulnerability waiting to be used against them.

He is not acting the way Shen Jiu did.

But he is doing *something.*

“And what may this question be?” Shen Qingqiu asks.

The Child–

Pulls out a book.

It is a worn down thing; old and taken care of, worn down not out of neglect but simply of age. It is thin and familiar and he stares at it, knuckles growing white from where he holds the fan.

“Zhao-shixiong gave this to us,” Shen Yuan says, holding it out for inspection. The book is trembling; the Child’s hands holding it are trembling. Shen Qingqiu sees the bruises in the shape of fingers on the Child’s thin wrist. Is it pain or fear that makes him tremble? “But this one must be doing something wrong, for this one has not grown. Could Shizun… inform us on what we must have missed?”

Shen Qingqiu snatches the book away.

His skin crawls as he touches it, memories of the past crowding in his mind, and he tucks it away. The boys stare up at him with wide, surprised eyes and he sneers at them from behind his fan.

“If the manual is unsuitable, find one that fits,” he snaps, “if months of cultivation has shown no result, then surely even children such as yourselves must understand a change is needed.” There is insult in his voice, *idiots* unsaid but heard. The boys look properly cowed. Shen Qingqiu snaps his fan shut, turns and walks away.

“Follow,” he says, and hears the children scramble to obey from behind.

Shen Qingqiu wastes time on assigning them more fitting manuals, punishes them with laps for not having solved such a thing earlier by themselves. He ensures that Ming Fan and his *friends* are aware the books were gifted by Shen Qingqiu and none other- if nothing else to save the books from being destroyed by vengeful hands.

Later, he uses the fake cultivation manual for kindling.

Useless piece of shit.

They sit in silence as they look through the books.

Their tree has begun to lose its leaves. Great, big patches of bare branches are now shown to the world and the leaves have fallen into a thick blanket around it that even the constant winds of Qing Jing Peak fail to unsettle.

The books aren't the same; Luo Binghe's was written by an entirely different author. It's that book which Shen Yuan is now reading, as they are now comparing the differences. That was Shen Yuan's excuse, anyway, to make sure that the Scum villain hadn't given them a new set of fakes or, worse, only given *Binghe* a fake.

Everything seems to check out.

That's *weird.*

Granted, everything has been weird. He now sits the proud owner of a whole one-hundred-fifty F-points after having been a bothersome little disciple these past weeks because somehow his plan is *actually working.* And somehow! *Somehow!!!* He had known but hadn't believed that the manuals in their hands were real.

Because he had been given F-points after Shen Qingqiu practically threw the books at them. After having made Shen Yuan's fingers sting from how harshly he yanked the fake manual out of his hands, he had just… thrown new books at them. And practically called them idiots and then he *punished them.* With laps. For being dumb???

"He just snatched it out of my hand…" Shen Yuan mutters to himself.

"I think Yuan has said such things at least ten times now," Luo Binghe fondly says, leaning against him. Shen Yuan squawks and presses back to avoid falling over, which only makes Binghe laugh. "Did it disturb you so much?"

"He didn't even ask for me to hand it over!" Shen Yuan bursts out, turning to face his friend, "he just! Shizun just *took it!?* Stop laughing, Binghe!"

Luo Binghe only laughs harder.

"It was so rude!" Luo Binghe gasps out, cheeks rosy from his laughter as he ducks away from Shen Yuan's swatting hands, "it was so rude, but your *face!"*

"You're supposed to be offended on my behalf!"

"I am! I am," Luo Binghe laughs, and then giggles as Shen Yuan shoves at him hard enough that he falls to the ground, clearly delighted by how red Shen Yuan's face is. *Awful! Evil! Bad protagonist!* "But also your *face,* Yuan!"

Shen Yuan hides said face in his hands and groans pitifully. He thinks even his *ears* have turned red from how he is burning up.

"A-Yuan! A-Luo!" Ning Yingying's voice calls and Shen Yuan sighs.

Shen Qingqiu watches them more these days.

Shen Yuan doesn't like it when the Peak Lord looks for too long at Luo Binghe. It makes his skin crawl, the future of a blackened lotus ominously hovering in his mind and yeah maybe he can't do *everything* to stop it (Shen Qingqiu *is* a Scum villain) but maybe he can at least make sure the whole sect doesn't get absolutely demolished in the future because not everyone deserves torture and murder. So Shen Yuan tries his best to unlearn the things the world has taught him so far.

Shen Yuan demands attention.

Not literally, obviously. Holy shit, the idea of acting like a spoiled brat, demanding attention with stomping feet and a loud, grating voice like some–

No!

No, not that. But he tries to keep track of what gives him the most F-points. He adjusts, tries to fine-tune it the way speedrunners prepare for a new world record. He calls out the bullies on their mistakes during lessons; he shuffles closer to make a helpfully insulting little comment when a lower master seems to be annoying Shen Qingqiu. He does his best in class and he doesn't fawn like Ming Fan and he doesn't giggle like Ning Yingying.

But he feels like he needs to mix it up.

Shen Qingqiu is like a really hard boss. Shen Yuan can't just rely on the same kind of spam attacks all the time; he needs an edge. He needs to *actually* use the magic potions he's been hoarding all along! An impossible feat, yes, as all gamers know. But Shen Qingqiu has yet to approach first, which means Shen Yuan needs to step up the game.

Even if he personally is fine with avoiding Shen Qingqiu until the end of time, he *needs* those F-points. Maybe not at present, but surely in the future.

The question is what he needs to do.

What needs to be changed?

Sometimes, Shen Yuan wants to visit the other peaks.

He wants to compare. He wants to know if it's true, what *Proud Immortal Demon Way* claimed. Is Qing Jing Peak truly the most beautiful one? With its bamboo forests and gray stones, with its modest buildings and carefully cobblestoned courtyards and its library, boasting far more content than any other Peak?

Are the people on Qing Jing Peak more *rotten* to balance it?

Shen Yuan remembers being well off. He remembers being able to be lazy, to mooch off of his parents and not being blamed for it. The comfort of expensive things and the love of an adoring family that he happily loved back.

Were they assholes without knowing it?

Do the nobles of Qing Jing Peak know they are assholes? That the way they talk to him and Luo Binghe is more like one would speak to a dumb dog, even though both of them are *good* at what they do?

Luo Binghe excels at all things and Shen Yuan doesn't think he himself is doing too bad at the scholar aspect. He doesn't need that many adjustments when practicing the arts of fighting, either, and he's pretty sure he can do more with qi than Ming Fan could at his age.

He bites back comments because they're tiny *kids* and the older disciples don't pull their punches when pushed, though neither do they go out of their way to bully the way Ming Fan's group does.

Though the bullying is in a weird kind of limbo.

They clearly *want* to escalate. Ming Fan glares at them every time Ning Yingying spends too long speaking with them, Cui Wenyan's face could put darkened storm clouds to shame at every music lesson.

Zhao De is quiet and when the fuck did *he* become the scary one? Shen Yuan almost wants to put him as the leader now rather than Ming Fan, which would be a blatant subversion of the original work.

But whatever it is the trio wants to do, they aren't doing it. Not *yet.* He doesn't think it's because Luo Binghe sticks around; there's still shoves at both of them, the kind that sends them tumbling to the ground.

It might actually be because of Shen Qingqiu.

The Scum villain hasn't claimed Shen Yuan as his son, obviously. But the way he *doesn't* tell Shen Yuan to shut the fuck up and die seems to have spooked the trio.

Shen Yuan would say mission accomplished, but he knows his isekai.

Shit is about to get worse.

“Shizun?”

Shen Qingqiu doesn’t look at him, frowning down at the scroll Shen Yuan just delivered. He snatched it from Ming Fan and ran before the older boy could catch him, mostly by weaving through every winding path and tight space he could. Now he’s trying to calm his breathing and stand at attention as he sees in the distance Ming Fan stomping his way up the stairs.

Luo Binghe is chopping wood again. Ning Yingying was right that they always try to corner Shen Yuan when he’s alone; it’s part of why he snatched the scroll.

Zhao De and Cui Wenyan had *almost* cornered him before that.

Shen Yuan fidgets. Shen Qingqiu doesn’t reply.

“... Shizun?” he tries again, despite every flight or fight instinct blaring in horror within him, disaster alarms going !!!!!! in his brain.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes snapped to him. The frown deepens.

“Why are you still here?” he asks, and Shen Yuan flinches. He tugs at his sleeves, then forces himself to stop.

“This one had a question,” is his weak reply.

Shen Qingqiu looks around them, then pointedly back at him. Ah. Clearly the Scum villain knows such a sentence usually involves an audience. Ming Fan is still too far away to count as one, and is coming up behind Shen Qingqiu as well. He might not even know he’s there.

“Then speak.”

“... this one wonders how old Shizun is?”

The impatience in Shen Qingqiu’s eyes is replaced by… amusement? Shen Yuan blinks up at him, curious enough he almost forgets to be nervous. He was sure the question would piss the Peak Lord off. And yet, he is letting the scroll roll back up and watches Shen Yuan for a long moment.

It’s almost more surprising that Shen Yuan doesn’t feel the need to step away. To cower and apologize, even though the amusement isn’t warm or kind. The eyes remain sharp like daggers.

“Would an answer help you?” Shen Qingqiu shoots back, tucking the scroll away. Instead he puts his closed fan against his own chin, gazing down upon Shen Yuan. Dissecting and amused. Perhaps waiting to see what way Shen Yuan will twitch.

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan dares, and the fan snaps open, hiding Shen Qingqiu’s lower face. What a poser; it feels like a *cheat,* right then. He wants to know if the man is smiling or frowning or *something.*

“Old enough,” and before Shen Yuan can ask what that even means, Shen Qingqiu continues, “Ming Fan, follow. You shall deliver a message to Bai Zhan Peak for this master.”

Ming Fan, who has finally caught up, freezes. He looks briefly terrified behind Shen Qingqiu, but by the time their Shizun turns to face him, he has managed to put that away to obediently nod instead.

“This one is honored, Shizun!”

“Hm.”

They leave, and Shen Yuan stares as they do so.

Old enough for fucking *what?*

(+50 F-points! Congratulations!)

The first snow arrives silently.

It is midday and the sky is gray, a blank slate of softness that reminds him of downy feathers and the vague memory of his mother’s pearls back in his first life.

Shen Yuan finds himself not under the tree, but under cover nevertheless. The pavilion by one of the small ponds is for once empty. The wooden beams that support it are painted white and its roof is made of green tiles. He doesn’t often get to visit it, not enough to properly admire the beautiful carvings inlaid into the wood, or how perfectly symmetrical the patterns in the stone floor are.

He sits on one of the three benches under the roof. Luo Binghe sits on his left and Ning Yingying sits on his right and they watch as the snow lazily drifts down. Ning Yingying has white fur wrapped around her neck, and Shen Yuan wonders if it's a gift from Shen Qingqiu or someone else. He and Luo Binghe have only bundled up in thicker layers instead, because disciples their age are not allowed to leave the mountain.

“You need to praise Shizun more,” Ning Yingying declares, looking back down at the ribbons she is trying to braid. Three overall; green, orange and white. The braid is messy and lumpy, but it’s a compromise they have all landed on because Ning Yingying still wants to learn and Luo Binghe doesn’t want anyone else but Shen Yuan to braid him.

(fair, honestly, considering how surprisingly bad at it Ning Yingying is)

“This one thinks he is warming up to me without such things,” Shen Yuan says, then points to where she needs to tighten it. Luo Binghe leans against him, a barely there pressure that he doesn’t mind, “I think Shijie is far better at praise than I am.”

“I only speak the truth! Shizun *is* talented and beautiful and handsome and very clever too,” Ning Yingying laughs, then beams a bright smile at him, “and you look so much like him, A-Yuan!”

It’s supposed to be a compliment. Shen Yuan *does* feel his cheeks grow warm, though he is more embarrassed than flattered, and he leans away from her. Shen Yuan winces as his head bumps against Luo Binghe, but when he looks at his friend, the other boy only smiles back before looking towards the girl.

“Shijie,” Luo Binghe says, “this one wonders, *why* is Ming Fan the head disciple?”

“Ming-shixiong,” Shen Yuan corrects.

Because that’s an unfortunate little habit of Binghe lately; casually showing disrespect towards Ming Fan and his friends. To their faces. It is *not* helping things and he waits in horror for the day he does so in front of Shen Qingqiu. That won’t end well.

“Ming-shixiong,” Luo Binghe echoes and Shen Yuan frowns at his insincere tone.

“Shixiong is very hardworking and diligent! He is quite rude to you two, and I don’t know *why* he is such a bully. But Shizun wouldn’t have him as the head disciple if he wasn’t good at it,” Ning Yingying says, though she huffs doing so, “but Shizun *should* tell him off more often! It’s not *fair.”*

“It’s not,” Luo Binghe agrees, which what??? That’s *not* the script. Luo Binghe is supposed to think Shizun knows best at this age! “We really *should* tell Shizun, don’t you agree, Yuan?”

“No! No, this one does *not* wish to tell Shizun,” he protests and gets up to face them both. He frowns and puts his hands on his hips, trying his very best to channel his ex-life father's *I'm not mad, just disappointed* glare at them both, “which I’ve said *many times,* Binghe.”

Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying both blink at him, utterly unrepentant.

“A-Yuan is so funny,” their Shijie brightly says, “I remember when you came here! You were so quiet and tiny! Now you’re loud and whiny instead.”

Luo Binghe glares; once again the protagonist doesn't like it when his future wife compliments other men, even his friend, and Shen Yuan hurriedly holds his hands up.

"I'm taller than you, Shijie," he points out, then realizes that wouldn't assure Luo Binghe of Shen Yuan following the Bro Code. He tries to come up with something, *anything* to deescalate the situation.

And as he stares helplessly at them, there's movement behind.

Shen Yuan blinks; then squints. A man is marching towards them. He is not in the green of Qing Jing Peak, but instead dark blue. He is marching with purpose and wearing a crown suited for a Peak Lord. Shen Yuan has absolutely no clue who it is.

But the man is marching towards them with *purpose* and Shen Yuan takes a step back before he can stop himself, heart speeding up at the dark look in the man's eyes.

"A-Yuan?" Ning Yingying asks as Luo Binghe gets to his feet, twisting to see what Shen Yuan is staring at and then–

Shen Yuan squeaks as his feet leave the ground and his uniform collar digs into his throat as he is picked up by the scruff, staring wide-eyed at the man glaring at him, holding him as if he weighs *nothing.*

"Yuan!"

"A-Yuan!"

"Did you qi deviate?" the stranger asks, holding Shen Yuan up to eye-level. He stares in mute horror, too shocked to care about his neck or hair or anything. His feet are dangling, damn it.

The man has a beauty mark under his left eye.

The man, holding him as if he weighs less than nothing, has a *beauty mark* under his left eye and has the most beautiful, feminine face ever. It looks absurd with his wide shoulders and how he is just- just *holding* Shen Yuan. *Like holding a couple of grapes,* he thinks hysterically. Haha memes.

"Let him go!" Luo Binghe demands, suddenly looking very short from Shen Yuan's current position. That's cute. No wonder no one ever takes them seriously if Luo Binghe looks like that from above, all puffed up like a steamed bun.

"Yes! Please let Shidi go!" Ning Yingying says, having joined Luo Binghe's side. Her hands are clenched into fists and she looks as puffed up as Luo Binghe.

The man frowns at them.

"Go away," he says, and then shakes Shen Yuan hard enough it rattles his brain. Dizzy, Shen

Yuan reaches for the hand holding him and paws at it, “why are you a *child?”* the man demands, as if Shen Yuan has absolutely no right to be such a thing.

“You’re hurting Shidi!” Ning Yingying yells, and to Shen Yuan’s horror both Ning Yingying and Luo Binghe *kick* the man. Ning Yingying looks more scared than angry but Luo Binghe looks like he is ready to start his demon lord arc years early.

“Stop!” Shen Yuan yelps out, “stop, he’s- he’s a Peak Lord, please–”

“Shijie, go get Shizun!” Luo Binghe snaps and no, wait, *don’t do that,* but Ning Yingying is already running as fast as her thirteen year old legs can take her. Which is pretty fast, actually. Damn. She is *sprinting.*

Luo Binghe goes for a punch to the gut.

The Peak Lord doesn’t even flinch.

“Weak,” the Peak Lord says and kicks Luo Binghe right in the face.

Shen Yuan gasps; he stares at where Luo Binghe has fallen and sees the blood rushing from his nose, staining the protagonist’s lips red. Luo Binghe glares with tears in his eyes from the blow and Shen Yuan snaps his face towards the Peak Lord and *kicks.*

He manages to hit, but the Peak Lord just looks at him with a deeply unimpressed glare. It’s a glare full of distaste, as if Shen Yuan is beneath him. The way his uniform digs into his throat is bordering on painful. Panic crowds in the back of his mind, so Shen Yuan channels everything he has learnt into *twisting* and *grabbing,* until he finds himself hugging the arm holding him.

And then he bites.

Shen Qingqiu arrives with a tearful, red-faced Ning Yingying to the sight of two children biting the Bai Zhan Peak Lord.

He stops for a moment, fan hiding his lower face as he takes in the scene. Liu Qingge shakes his child-infested arm and leg, looking annoyed and flustered as neither let go, their angry sounds only increasing in volume.

“Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu greets and steps forward, and Shen Yuan stops biting to stare at him. He looks at Ning Yingying, who is clutching at Shen Qingqiu’s robes and glaring the most vicious daggers he’s ever seen from their Shijie at the man Shen Yuan has been biting, “this one has been told you are assaulting disciples of Qing Jing Peak.”

The fan snaps closed and his face looks haughty, lips twitching as he pointedly drags his eyes from child to child, until finally he meets the man’s eyes.

“Is this how Bai Zhan Peak trains?” he mockingly asks.

Liu Qingge stares at Shen Qingqiu; he then looks at Shen Yuan, who is still clinging onto his arm for dear life, and then once more back at the Lord of Qing Jing Peak. His eyes are wide and then they narrow.

"You have a *child?"* the man asks and the haughty amusement on Shen Qingqiu's face abruptly becomes acidic.

"Children," Shen Qingqiu says in the tone of someone wanting to say *brats,* "stop biting Liu-shidi." He sneers. "One can't know where he has been."

Luo Binghe wipes at his bloody nose and glares furiously at Liu Qingge as he helps Shen Yuan find his balance from where Shen Yuan let go of the arm he had been clinging to. Shen Yuan doesn't mind; he can't stop glaring either, jaw aching from where he had tried to bite down as hard as he possibly could. They both glower at the Bai Zhan Peak Lord which *normally* Shen Yuan would fanboy the fuck out over, because *ohmygosh Bai Zhan Peak Lord!!! The one you never got to see in the original!!!*

But the man kicked Luo Binghe! In the face!!!

"Is the mother a whore?" Liu Qingge bluntly asks. It startles Shen Yuan into a flinch. He looks at their Shizun, searching for any signs of confirmation or denial.

It would make sense if his mother was a whore; a woman of the brothels. The rumors in the original story often spoke of Shen Qingqiu visiting such places. They spoke of many things, but that is the one thing that directly relates to Shen Yuan.

"Get off my peak," is the biting reply, Shen Qingqiu's face remaining pure acid and danger, not a hint visible whether it was a yes or no. Liu Qingge obviously notices.

"That is not an answer."

The tension skyrockets. What had been a peaceful day of first snow and clouded breaths abruptly becomes something more. Shen Yuan's fear returns, anger draining out of him as he hurriedly tugs Luo Binghe away from where they stand between the two peak lords. He is suddenly very aware of the fact that cultivators come with swords.

For once he doesn't mind when Ning Yingying latches onto his arm as they all three shuffle to the side, eyes flicking between the two men.

"This one doesn't owe you one. Get off my peak."

"You dishonor Cang Qiong Mountain."

"Are you deaf, Shidi?"

Liu Qingge glares.

"Shen," he says, hand on the pommel of his sword. A threat, a demand, and Shen Yuan

wonders if there is time to run for help. But to whom? Yue Qingyuan? The man is an eternity away, enough that by the time they would return, one or both of the angry men before them would be fucking *dead.*

Most likely Shen Qingqiu.

Which is probably a bad thing and not something he should risk.

“Why did Shishu pick me up?” he asks, voice higher than he intends. He flushes as everyone looks at him and instead he focuses on how Luo Binghe holds his hand and Ning Yingying is holding his arm, “Shishu picked me up and shook me and kicked Binghe. Why?”

“An interesting question from my disciple. Why *would* the mighty War God of Bai Zhan do such a thing?” Shen Qingqiu says and steps closer. They are still far apart, Liu Qingge under the pavilion’s roof and Shen Qingqiu out in the drifting snow.

Shen Yuan expects the Bai Zhan Peak Lord’s glare to worsen, for his hand to grasp at his sword or, perhaps, a scathing insult to match Shen Qingqiu’s sharp tongue.

Instead Liu Qingge’s pale cheeks gain a tint of pink.

“Thought he was you,” he says, and Shen Yuan stares at him.

What?

“What.” says Shen Qingqiu in a tone so flat, paper would be jealous.

“I received your message. I came here. He was here. No one told me you had a child.”

“I claim no relation with the child,” the Scum villain snaps. Shen Yuan flinches and feels Luo Binghe squeeze his hand. He hears Ning Yingying gasp. “And this one’s message did not require your presence. Leave.”

Liu Qingge’s face does a complicated thing. Twitchy and furious, eyes briefly glancing towards Shen Yuan, before they narrow upon Shen Qingqiu once more.

“You are an honorless bastard,” he declares.

“And you are the sole proof one needs to know Bai Zhan Peak requires nothing but hands to hold swords,” Shen Qingqiu hisses back. “Leave. One would not want to involve Zhangmen-shixiong in this.”

He says it like it is a disgusting thing; Shen Yuan would very much want Yue Qingyuan’s involvement, actually. Everything would feel much less dangerous if the super powerful Peak Lord was there to mediate peace and love and whatever else Yue Qingyuan did.

“I will speak to him of this,” Liu Qingge says, but he steps out from the pavilion and unsheathes his sword. The blade hovers before him.

Shen Yuan stands frozen as the man's eyes meet his.

He wonders what he looks like; not very impressive, for sure. Hair tousled from what just happened, clutching to his friends like a scared child. A mini-Shen Qingqiu, so alike that the war god himself thought the man had qi deviated, had, what, become a child? Like stallion Binghe in that one chapter? Does the man think he is like the Scum villain, inside as well as he is outside? Does the man plan to take revenge for how Shen Yuan bit him? Does he plan to apologize for kicking Luo Binghe bloody?

The man says nothing. He leaves, flying off on his sword. His dark blue robes make him look like an angry cloud flying in the sky against the pale gray of snowfall.

Shen Yuan dares to glance at Shen Qingqiu.

He looks fucking *pissed.*

"Binghe," Shen Yuan whispers, freeing his arm from Ning Yingying so that he can turn to face his friend. He winces at how the blood is still dripping, and how does one know if a nose is broken? He almost asks their Shizun, but the very thought of doing so sends a chill down his spine. It doesn't feel very smart to gain the man's attention at the moment. "Can I put snow on it? I think snow helps…?"

"Is A-Yuan alright?" Ning Yingying asks as Shen Yuan gingerly scoops up a small pile of snow to press against Luo Binghe's nose. Unlike Shen Yuan, she doesn't bother with whispering. Her voice is loud in the stillness that Liu Qingge left them in.

"This one is fine, Binghe is the one bleeding," he assures her, because she *did* cry for him. The girl is still sniffling and wiping at her snotty nose. It's difficult to imagine her as a future wife; right now, Shen Yuan is just terribly reminded of his little sister.

"I'm fine," Binghe says but he sounds muffled and nasal and impossible to take seriously. Shen Yuan bites back a nervous giggle. The urge to giggle at all quickly disappears as Shen Qingqiu steps next to them.

The man's eyes are sharp, his posture remains tense. He looks them over, eyes still narrowed from the glare he had sent Liu Qingge. Shen Yuan's breath hitches.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* Shen Qingqiu often took his anger out on Binghe if something went wrong. Physical punishments would be heaped onto the young boy's shoulders for things he had no fault in, to the point that the protagonist would be limping after.

If he could walk at all.

Will Shen Qingqiu punish them for Liu Qingge's behavior?

"Those of Bai Zhan Peak have a truly impressive lack of intelligence," the man says, and

Shen Yuan blinks. “They rely on their brutish nature and nothing more.”

The fan snaps open, pale blue with delicate flowers of white painted onto it. Shen Yuan doesn’t dare to remove his hands from Binghe’s face, even though his fingers are turning red from how the snow melts against them.

“You need not bother your superiors with a simple *nosebleed,”* the man says from behind the fan, a sneer faintly heard in his voice. “Do not whimper, it is not broken. And do not stain the uniform of Qing Jing Peak. Pinch your nose shut, lean forwards *slightly,* only idiots tilt their heads back. Sit until it stops. I do not want your blood staining more than it already has.”

With that, Shen Qingqiu scoffs and departs.

Shen Yuan stares after him.

(+100 F-points! Keep going!)

Chapter End Notes

LQG: Shen Qingqiu has a CHILD
YQY: isn't Xiao-Yuan the cutest
LQG: the child bit me
YQY: he is the best child, I agree.

Woo! Quite honestly had no idea if I would be able to upload this today but I DID IT! Also, the ao3 crash gave me a scare last week! My tumblr is Grubus, not that I post anything on there but if anything similar happens I feel like it's a good thing to know. *thumbs up* I mostly lurk and reblog from others so don't expect much from me.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Hello! Skip this if you do not want any kind of spoilers, but here is a trigger warning!

This chapter deals with claustrophobia/the fear of being buried alive and escalated bullying.
It is in the section that starts with "There is white."

Stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snow lays thick on the ground.

It used to crunch when walked upon, the kind of snow that formed perfect snowballs. He had watched Shen Yuan carefully make tiny little figures with it, piled up like an imaginary army of misshapen orbs around the tree which Luo Binghe considered *their* tree months back.

Shen Yuan was so creative. Those strange little things were given stories of intense complexity, the kind of tales which made Luo Binghe wonder where Shen Yuan stored it all and why he wasn't writing it down for others to enjoy.

Though Luo Binghe liked that only he got to hear them and he liked the way Shen Yuan's voice grew loud with excitement. He liked being the only one seeing his friend's eyes light up brighter than fireworks as he detailed stories of time and love and revenge with the help of *snow.*

Luo Binghe's favorite snowmen were, of course, the two that Shen Yuan had made of them both. Standing next to each other like a united front right by the roots of their tree, the army of snowmen before them sprawling out in messy lines. They looked like the commanding forces of that tiny army, united and ready to fight.

Snow has continued to fall however, and now it is piling high. Half of their chores are dedicated to keeping the stone paths clear. It is impossible to get to their tree without being soaked by the time they reach it, the snow much like powder that clings and becomes water the moment you touch it. The little snow figures must have been swamped days ago, forever lost to the white void of *too much snow, Binghe!* As Shen Yuan now often whined.

Luo Binghe stares at the bamboo house.

It feels wrong to be here alone. Shen Yuan is far behind and unaware. Luo Binghe had left him with Ning Yingying, the only safe option even if she often misstepped. She had kicked at

the Bai Zhan Peak Lord with Binghe, and for that he was willing to *briefly* leave Shen Yuan alone with her.

Shen Yuan had sprained his ankle.

Which was of course not true; *Zhao De* had sprained Shen Yuan's ankle. A shove and a kick when Shen Yuan was already down, during one of the too many times which Luo Binghe was forced away from his side.

It's scary.

It's so *scary,* knowing that Luo Binghe *must* leave when told to. Every time he does, Shen Yuan is hurt. He knows the others grab his hair too. It's sometimes in such a disarray that Luo Binghe is only barely allowed to smooth it out, because if his hands linger too long, Shen Yuan gets a distant look in his eyes that is as scary as leaving him alone.

Shen Yuan doesn't want his hair braided and he doesn't like it when you play with it. Luo Binghe is allowed to smooth it out on the good days, but the good days are becoming less each week because Zhao De and his friends have clearly figured out that Shen Yuan's hair is a weak point.

But weeks ago, Shen Qingqiu helped.

It was a day of confusing feelings. Luo Binghe's face no longer has the bruises from when the Bai Zhan man kicked him, his uniform has no blood stains left behind from that day.

Shen Qingqiu had saved Shen Yuan and he had given them advice on nosebleeds and had seemed to claim it was no fault of theirs that the man had attacked them, though his words had been taunting and confusing and near insults.

Shen Qingqiu had also denied his relationship with Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan had *flinched* hearing it.

Shen Yuan's ankle is sprained and the bullying has become worse. Shen Yuan's plan might work or it might not, but it is *slow.* Shen Qingqiu helped them when he saw they were in trouble. Shen Qingqiu is Shizun.

Luo Binghe takes a deep breath and knocks.

The door swings open. Shen Qingqiu sits by a desk piled high with scrolls and papers, not having bothered getting up to open the door. A use of qi, then, and Luo Binghe wonders when *he* will be able to open doors using it.

"Enter," Shizun says, and Luo Binghe makes sure to stomp the snow off his boots before he does so. He closes the door as he enters and does his very best to not look around the house. He's not here to stare.

He's here to save Yuan.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes flick up once, then the man does a double take. His face remains stoic, as blank as marble. Luo Binghe stares back and resists the urge to clasp at his jade Guanyin.

"Luo Binghe."

"This one greets Shizun," Luo Binghe says and offers a bow. His hands feel sweaty, but he does not wipe them. He does not exit the bow until Shen Qingqiu speaks once more, voice flat and suspicious, reminding Luo Binghe of food stall owners before he revealed he was there for work, not to steal.

"And *why* are you bothering this master?"

"This one is here on behalf of the disciple Shen Yuan, Shizun."

There is a scoff. He watches as Shen Qingqiu finishes writing. The soft sound of a brush against paper is loud in the silence. Past Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe can see a window. It is circle-shaped and all he sees is snow. There is the crackling of logs burning in the fireplace. Dressed in his thick winter robes, his skin feels itchy from the warmth the longer he waits.

Luo Binghe tries to not fidget, but it is difficult. Shen Qingqiu puts the paper aside and reaches for another. Will the man ever respond?

He waits a moment more before he breaks.

"Disciple Shen Yuan sprained his ankle today," he dares to say and refuses to back down when his reward is a glare, "though the fault lies with Zhao De and Cui Wenyan." And Ming Fan, but Binghe doesn't think bringing up the head disciple is a good idea.

Already he is starting to understand *why* Yuan didn't want to tell Shizun. The man's glare is cold and cutting, not even a twitch at the mention of Shen Yuan's name.

Behind his back and hidden from sight, Luo Binghe clenches his hands into fists.

"This one is worried that Shen Yuan will be injured even worse in the future, Shizun. Please help."

"And what does disciple Luo Binghe suggest?" Shen Qingqiu says. He has put aside his brush and ink, papers pushed away as he focuses on Luo Binghe. He looks untouchable and ethereal behind his desk. His face says he doesn't have time for these matters and Luo Binghe bristles before he takes a deep breath.

"This humble one would appreciate Shizun's guidance."

"And yet you walk into my home and demand a solution to a problem that is not even yours. I hear only lies when you call yourself *humble,"* Shen Qingqiu says.

It is not in a kind tone.

Luo Binghe feels as if someone is squeezing his heart. He stares as the man before him stands and walks around his desk. Unlike Shen Yuan, he does not walk like a kitten learning how to be graceful.

There is menace and it takes everything in him to not back down.

He is twelve, soon thirteen and he's not a coward. His heart trembles and he keeps his hands hidden behind his back and it is scary but he will *not* back down. No matter how glacial those familiar green eyes are.

"I do not care about the weak," Shen Qingqiu says, "if disciple Shen Yuan can't protect himself, then he will simply suffer. That is the way of Qing Jing Peak."

Luo Binghe stares.

"You're family," he says, and it comes out angry. Because he *is* angry, he realizes. Furious, burning up from within and Luo Binghe stops hiding his hands so that he can clench them by his sides instead, "you are family, and he is hurt! Family is meant to *help!"*

"I claim no relation with that child, and you must watch your tone or you will be *punished,"* Shen Qingqiu snaps, fan jabbing against Luo Binghe's brow as if it was a dull knife. He winces. "I will not go out of my way to help a child that should know better. Nor will I let disrespect go unpunished."

The fan snaps towards the door. It slams open, the wind cold and cutting as it rushes in.

"Ten laps," Shen Qingqiu says, "and chop some *wood."*

The way the man says it is familiar. It is said mockingly and in the exact same tone as Ming Fan, and the way Shen Qingqiu's eyes glint reveals more than enough.

He knows what happens to them and he is not doing anything.

Luo Binghe bites his lip hard enough it bleeds; he stomps out and offers no bow. He wants to yell, to demand justice and he wants to make sure Shen Yuan is never hurt *again.*

But if he can't do it with the help of rules and a Shizun who doesn't deserve the title, then he must find a different way.

The door slams shut behind him.

Luo Binghe runs the ten laps on iced over paths as the wind picks up, snow becoming biting at his cheeks. He wills his heart to cool down as he runs and runs, because he can't let Shen Yuan know that his father is an awful, evil man.

Shen Yuan would be sad.

He chops the wood viciously and only once he is exhausted and trembling does he go back to Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying.

Yuan is teaching her how to play a new melody on the guqin. When he spots Luo Binghe in the doorway to the dorms, he smiles brightly. His foot is elevated. He pats the empty spot next to him, just enough space for Luo Binghe to squeeze in.

Luo Binghe smiles back and sits.

He will protect Shen Yuan.

He just has to do it *his* way now.

Shen Yuan stares at the ceiling.

His foot is elevated. He feels silly laying there, on a hard bed with a blanket bunched up to support his foot. His ankle is wrapped, cooling talismans stuck to the bandage by a master who stands in for minor medical emergencies. It's tingly. Shen Yuan's toes twitch.

"Do you think qi would heal me faster?" he asks, turning his head to face Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying.

It's lunch time. Luo Binghe is sitting on his own bed, eating the food he brought. The other boy had been far too kind and made sure Shen Yuan ate first, which had been embarrassing because he had sprained his *ankle,* not his hands. Ning Yingying is on her own bed as well, just barely in view from where Shen Yuan lays.

"Can you use qi already, A-Yuan?" she asks.

"Well, some," he admits, pretending to not be very proud about it. He can't do anything cool yet, but he has been able to pick up some objects lately which… yeah, okay. That *is* cool. He can use *qi!* "But healing is different, is it not?"

"I'm sure that if we had the right books, Yuan could figure it out quicker than any Qian Cao Peak disciple," Luo Binghe loyally says. Shen Yuan beams at him, because having the *protagonist's* approval never fails to make his heart warm. Even if he is spouting bullshit.

"How long does it take? To heal?" Ning Yingying wonders.

"Um. I think two weeks? Maybe?"

“That’s too long!” she gasps, and Shen Yuan nods miserably. It *is* too long. He has already seen how Zhao De smirks at him in the mornings when he passes. What a bitch. Probably planning on how to steal his blanket. Again.

Though that might be a Ming Fan thing. Shen Yuan has yet to figure out who does it.

“It is,” he sighs and stares up at the ceiling again. Oh, there’s a spider. Aren’t they supposed to be hibernating? Is it a spider infused with qi, so it doesn’t *need* to hibernate during winter? That’s so cool. “This one won’t even be able to attend classes because of the ice and stairs.”

“We should ask Shizun to heal you,” Ning Yingying says.

“No,” Luo Binghe says before Shen Yuan can.

Which *what.*

“What?” he says, turning his head to stare at Luo Binghe. Binghe who *always* suggests going to Shen Qingqiu. But now he’s frowning and eating his rice, not meeting Shen Yuan’s eyes. “Why not?”

Luo Binghe shrugs.

Shen Yuan frowns at him, but it’s very ineffective when his target refuses to look at him. So Shen Yuan sighs heavily, the way dogs do. As if the whole world has disappointed them. He sees Binghe twitch but still the other boy doesn’t look up. Shen Yuan squints, vaguely aware of Ning Yingying rambling in the background about how Shen Qingqiu healed her that one time when *she* sprained her ankle.

“I’m bored,” Shen Yuan complains and Luo Binghe, best of friends, folds.

“This one could go and see if there is a new demonic bestiary in the library?” Luo Binghe says, putting his empty bowl to the side so that he can instead sit on Shen Yuan’s bed.

His hand is a bit too close to Shen Yuan’s hair. He twitches, then grimaces at his own twitch. But Luo Binghe shifts away and Shen Yuan nervously smiles up at his friend.

“Do you really think there is one?” he asks, grabbing Binghe’s hand to give it a squeeze. A silent apology. “Even with the snow making travel difficult?”

“No,” Ning Yingying says, and Shen Yuan laughs until his sides hurt.

Snow is one of his least favorite things.

It's a decision Shen Yuan made an hour ago and one he has made multiple times since he first found himself in this world. He never experienced much snow *before* he was in this world, born a city boy and never strayed. Cities had this wonderful thing where they were just too warm from all the car fumes and massive crowds that snow struggled to survive for longer than a few minutes and it was *so* nice.

But if he thought snow below the mountain was bad, then Shen Yuan will apologize to the snow of the past. Because the snow of the past hid icy patches and made it miserable on the streets but at least you could fucking walk *on it.*

He stares in horror as snow piles until it becomes taller than himself.

"That's illegal," he declares, startling Luo Binghe into a laugh.

They are on their way to calligraphy, arms aching from scrubbing laundry. Shen Yuan has made sure to keep his still kind-of-wet hands tucked into his sleeves to protect them from the cold air, trusting Luo Binghe to use his superior protagonist reflexes to stop Shen Yuan from slipping on any ice patches. His ankle is healed, but Shen Yuan is not the most graceful of disciples. That title belongs solely to Luo Binghe.

The snow fell heavily during the night and for once the older disciples had been the ones in charge of scooping the snow out of the way, the labor deemed too heavy for anyone below a certain height.

"Why is it illegal?" Luo Binghe asks around his laughter.

"I feel like we are in a labyrinth. Is there anything beside this? Are we doomed, Binghe?" he asks, gesturing towards the walls of white surrounding them, "will we ever see anything but *snow?"*

"Perhaps not," Binghe agrees, grinning too widely to sell his attempt at a solemn voice, "maybe this is it. Perhaps we do not need to go to calligraphy if it doesn't exist anymore."

Shen Yuan sighs dreamily.

"Oh, such a shame," he says, "no longer shall I have ink on my sleeves nor must I read a poem of matters I care not for! That is, I mean, so sad. I'm so sad, Binghe."

Luo Binghe giggles.

"I could possibly cry," he informs his friend, who giggles harder, "I am devastated. No longer will I have to trim the brush into the exact measurements of-"

His foot skids on a patch of ice; Shen Yuan squeaks and grabs hold of Luo Binghe, sending

them both to the ground. Except, of course, they were walking down stairs. Stairs of dark gray stone that apparently hid the surprise of clear ice.

They keep sliding down that bumpy road, clinging to each other and fruitlessly kicking at the slippery stairs in order to slow down their descent. They slide past other disciples, who are walking slowly and haltingly to avoid the same mishap, and it's all Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe can do to avoid sliding straight into the walls of snow and, instead, using their wildly kicking feet to steer.

Their luck does not last long.

Shen Yuan doesn't have the time to scream before the impact; they turn the corner and there Shen Qingqiu is, back turned and speaking with Ming Fan.

They collide.

Not with Shen Qingqiu, but instead Ming Fan. The Qing Jing Peak Lord uses his superior Immortal Coolness to leap out of the way, and instead it is Ming Fan sent sprawling with a squawk.

Shen Yuan groans. There's at least three elbows digging into him, and he pushes fruitlessly at whoever is the heaviest.

"This is- I'm just- how!" Ming Fan says, unable to finish a single sentence as he leaps back up onto his feet. Spluttering and red faced, eyes flicking towards Shen Qingqiu and then back to the children laid by his feet, "so- so undisciplined! *Shizun,* let this one punish them!"

"Very well."

Shen Yuan jerks his head up, eyes wide as he stares at the man.

Shen Qingqiu stares back, eyes briefly flicking between the two of them. His gaze darkens into a glare, and Shen Yuan shrinks back.

"After the lesson," Shen Qingqiu says, and walks off.

It is still enough to make Ming Fan light up; he grins gleefully at them before he goes inside, the hall master having arrived for the class and only sending them a confused glance as they pass. Leaving Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan sprawled out on the cold stones of the courtyard.

"Are you hurt?" Luo Binghe asks after a moment, starting to pat him over. Shen Yuan lets him. His mind is whirling, trying to figure out what he must have done to make Shen Qingqiu mad at him. Mad at *them.* He stares at the door to their classroom.

"Yuan?" Luo Binghe says and gently squeezes his shoulder. He almost flinches, but catches himself. Shen Yuan looks at him, then down at his hands. They tremble. It must be from the adrenaline of their sudden ice slide.

“I thought I made progress,” he says.

Luo Binghe doesn’t seem to know what to say to that.

The bullying had been in limbo.

There had been a couple reasons for it, though the biggest one had been the very simple fact that Shen Qingqiu had not disapproved of Shen Yuan’s shameless behavior. He had accepted the tattling and the suggestions and daring little comments with a tilt of his head and a glint in his eyes. He had seemed to encourage it with barely there acknowledgements given in the shape of simple chores. Shen Yuan had hoarded the F points and begun to feel almost-safe in his chosen quest of becoming a teacher’s pet.

It had been enough to confuse the three banes of Shen Yuan’s existence and let the limbo continue for longer than expected.

The limbo is broken with Ming Fan’s permission to punish.

Like the opening of floodgates, the bullying becomes worse than ever.

There is white.

It stings at his eyes and burns his cheeks with how cold it is. The hand pressing him down lets go, and Shen Yuan coughs and stumbles away from the pile of snow, knees weak as he shivers and wipes at his face with clumsy hands. There is laughter, loud and grating.

“How can a disciple of Qing Jing Peak be so *clumsy?”* Zhao De asks and shoves at him once more.

Shen Yuan gasps and almost falls, only barely able to grab onto a pillar of stone. It is cold, horribly so, and he wishes he had his gloves. But they were missing that morning, gone like his blanket would be in the evening. Luo Binghe had been dragged off to chores before he could notice and offer his own, and Shen Yuan feels guilty for being upset about that. Luo Binghe needs his gloves too.

His fingers are red and biting cold.

“Sorry, Shixiong,” Shen Yuan apologizes, because he is alone and he knows better than to mouth off when there are three boys years older than him, surrounding and laughing like hyenas.

“So humble now,” Ming Fan huffs, throwing a snowball at him. It lands on his head and crumbles. Shen Yuan flinches and dares not wipe it off of him. Instead he feels the clumps of snow slide down his hair and get inside his coat, hot-cold against his skin. “You became far too cocky, thinking you had Shizun’s approval!”

Ming Fan isn’t wrong.

“This one apologizes, Shixiong,” he mumbles.

“You can’t even speak properly. How long have you been part of this sect, and you dishonor our Shizun by *mumbling?* Shameless.”

There is a hand coming in from the side, reaching for his head; Shen Yuan scrambles back, but it does not stop Cui Wenyan. The older boy gets a glint in his dark eyes and gets hold of Shen Yuan’s arm instead. He gets yanked closer, then shoved hard into another snow pile. This time, he lands on his back.

It’s one of the fluffy ones, the kind of snow pile that explodes into cold confetti and lets you sink into it. Shen Yuan does not want to do such a thing, but he has no power over gravity. He sinks into the snowpile until he feels stuck, limbs awkwardly spread as he struggles, cheeks hot from more than just the cold as his eyes sting. The trio laughs.

“I heard some animals use the snow for baths,” Zhao De says. He hovers above Shen Yuan. He rarely grins; that’s something Shen Yuan notices. He instead gets this awful crookedness to his smile, the kind Shen Yuan used to think only appeared in comics. “Let this Shixiong help you, Shidi.”

He stomps down on Shen Yuan’s middle, forcing the breath out of him. He gasps as Zhao De then keeps pressing down. The constant pressure *burns,* and he tries to shove at Zhao De’s leg. But his hands tremble too much, his teeth chattering loud enough to be heard. Snow crumbles and begins to fall onto him, and Shen Yuan doesn’t *think* one can drown in snow.

But he is suddenly terrified of the possibility.

The pressure leaves. Shen Yuan gasps for air, only then he has to quickly cover his face with his arms as Zhao De swipes snow onto him. Zhao De doesn’t stop, only keeps swiping down snow until sounds become muffled and Shen Yuan can’t see anything but white past his arms.

“Come on, the mongrel needs a proper *long* bath. Let’s pack the snow,” Zhao De says somewhere off to the side. Shen Yuan can hear the others laugh and he hears and feels how they start patting the snow down to make it firmer, heavier.

Shen Yuan kicks weakly, legs free but useless. He doesn't manage to connect. He only gets a kick back at his knee, and Shen Yuan would flinch if he could fucking *move.*

What kind of bullying is this, anyway? Do they want to turn him into a statue? A popsicle? They leave him there, and he wonders if his legs are just sticking out like awkwardly placed chopsticks.

It's really, really fucking cold.

Shen Yuan doesn't cry.

He lays there and loses track of time, trying and failing to push the snow away. Having put his arms over his face only made him more stuck. He feels the snow melt against him, soaking his clothes until he wonders if he really *will* die. Shen Yuan thinks about the books describing how to use qi to keep warm and he *tries.* He truly does. But it's just so fucking cold and he can't see anything but white and this path is a side path, rarely traveled on and what if no one ever *finds him what then, he doesn't want to prove her right he doesn't–*

"Yuan!"

"Binghe," he gasps, and he barely manages to keep the tears back as he feels Binghe dig at the snow in hurried movements.

"It's alright, I'm here, I'm here," he hears him say, and then the white disappears to reveal Binghe's wide eyes and Binghe leans down to help him up and Shen Yuan doesn't even think.

He latches on, arms around Luo Binghe's neck as he hides his face against his friend and *does not cry.*

But he gets embarrassingly close to it.

"I'm here," Binghe breathes against him, arms tight around Shen Yuan and grounding. He trembles and clings tighter, pathetically grateful that Luo Binghe lets him, "I'm here, it's fine, Binghe is here."

Shen Yuan shudders and nods and focuses on nothing else.

He wishes they had waited until summer.

Winter is an awful time to be bullied in, Shen Yuan thinks as snow is shoved under his clothes, as he is pushed and tripped and clothes stolen. As he is forced out to walk on ponds with too thin ice covering the water below.

Luo Binghe doesn't escape it either.

He hates that the most; he doesn't know how to fucking *help.* He was supposed to help the protagonist, wasn't he? Isn't that why he transmigrated into this shitty novel? How will he make sure the white lotus doesn't blacken and doesn't seek revenge?

Shen Yuan feels useless and that is the fucking *worst* feeling for a sidekick to have.

Because he is a sidekick, obviously. He will be Luo Binghe's wingman, the guy to maybe possibly advise against plans he knows ended badly in the novel.

But right now all he is, is a burden.

"Shizun–"

"This master has no time for petty disputes. Do your chores."

"This one is sorry, Shizun," Shen Yuan whispers and bows his head as Shen Qingqiu marches past, robes flowing like water behind him. The green is bright against the white of winter.

Once again there are no F-points.

There hasn't been any for days.

Shen Yuan's nails dig into his palms and he tries so, so hard to calm down. He doesn't want Luo Binghe to fuss again.

Ming Fan follows their master, only sparing Shen Yuan a smug smile as he does. Shen Yuan glares back, then winces as he catches himself, but it is too late.

"Five laps for disrespect!" Ming Fan calls out gleefully.

Shen Qingqiu only continues to walk away.

When he looks past the rolling hills of snow, he can still see their tree.

It stands tall; bare of all its leaves now, it looks dark and dreary against the white blanket of snow surrounding it. The branches spread out like a fan, a soft arch of natural growth. He remembers the little snowmen he built and placed near it. The stories that he pulled from a world he no longer lives in and the way Luo Binghe had leaned in with bright eyes as he listened to them.

The tree doesn't look inviting, but he misses it.

Shen Yuan wants to sit amongst its branches and eat melon seeds and laugh with Binghe about stupid, childish things.

Instead he wipes at his bloodied nose and scrambles to get up as Binghe throws himself at Cui Wenyan, the older disciple screaming like he is being attacked by a beast.

Not far from the truth, honestly. Luo Binghe is *vicious* as he kicks at Cui Wenyan's knee, making the older boy buckle and fall into the snow. Vicious as he follows up with a punch to the boy's nose and Shen Yuan grabs his arm and tugs.

"Stop! Stop, we will get in trouble," he hisses and manages to drag Luo Binghe away from Cui Wenyan. The boy lays there in the snow, shock bright on his face as he cradles his *own* bloodied nose.

Despite the way Shen Yuan's heart races, he can't help but feel a little tiny bit of satisfaction at the sight. *Not so fun when it happens to you too, now is it?* He thinks spitefully.

"He hurt you!" Luo Binghe protests, and Shen Yuan nods, then shakes his head. At least Binghe isn't trying to free himself to keep going, channeling all that hidden demonic rage or… whatever the fuck fuels him these days. Something, for sure, because his friend is practically vibrating with justified anger more often than not now.

"I'm fine," Shen Yuan insists, nose dripping blood and voice all nasal and funny. Blegh. "Let's- let's leave before he gets us in trouble, Binghe. Come *on,"* he says and drags a barely resisting Luo Binghe away.

They end up taking shelter under the roof of a storage building. It's far away and awkwardly placed, only there for the few times people must take care of the surrounding area. It means no one will bother them.

Luo Binghe helps him press snow to his nose and they sit and wait for it to stop. It's funny, really. No one told him nose bleeds would be so common in a martial arts story like this. He kind of expected more split lips and artfully placed bruises.

"I'm sorry," Luo Binghe mumbles after a long moment.

“For what? Binghe has nothing to apologize for,” Shen Yuan says.

Luo Binghe frowns down at his hands, and Shen Yuan wonders if maybe the brooding of a dark stallion has already begun. He had hoped they would at least finish puberty before that.

“For almost getting us in trouble,” Binghe finally says.

Shen Yuan doesn’t point out that they may still very well be in trouble. That if Cui Wenyan goes to Shen Qingqiu, their Shizun might just take his word over theirs. He also doesn’t apologize for how his plan clearly failed, nor does Shen Yuan apologize for not being able to figure out where it went wrong. Even though he should.

“If this one might give advice to Binghe,” he instead says, gingerly poking his nose to make sure the bleeding has stopped, “perhaps instead of attacking head on, we should do what the Invisible Bullhead Frog does.”

Binghe blinks at him.

Shen Yuan grins.

“Be sneaky,” he says, and watches Luo Binghe slowly smile.

There is a room for board games.

The only available board game is weiqi, which is of course fitting for their setting. There is no monopoly to be found in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* though he feels safe in assuming he would win if they did. Shen Yuan had always been good at such things, and often he formed an alliance with his little sister so that they could take down their older brothers. It had been nice.

Shen Yuan hears the door shut behind him.

He slowly puts down the weiqi board he had been wiping off. There is the sound of three footsteps. The classroom will see no more use for the day and Luo Binghe got in trouble for punching Cui Wenyan after all, now far away running laps around the peak. Cui Wenyan, of course, didn’t get in trouble for punching Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan is alone.

He stares at the board for a moment longer, heart beating like a drum inside his chest. He

fucking *hates* this. The escalation is ridiculous, pure drama movie, the kind of thing that ends sadly and is shown in classrooms to make sure people don't ever bully again. Can't it be less *real* if it has to be over the top? Can't it–

Shen Yuan scrambles to the side as a hand shoots out to grab him.

"Oh, so you did know we were here," Zhao De says as Shen Yuan backs away facing them, puts a table between them all, "why didn't Shidi greet his Shixiong?"

"This one greets Shixiong," Shen Yuan says obediently. He kind of spits the words out by accident and immediately knows he shouldn't have. Ming Fan is by the door. Cui Wenyan's nose is all bruised and bad looking. Did Luo Binghe *actually* manage to break it? That's cool.

"With that tone?" Ming Fan says, looking actually insulted. Dude. Who is the bully here? "This Shixiong was told that you are the reason the little beast attacked Cui Wenyan."

"Shixiong punched me first."

"It is a Shixiong's duty to educate their Shidi!" Ming Fan huffs, Cui Wenyan nodding along. Zhao De is still getting closer and Shen Yuan considers the window. He would have to get past Zhao De for it, but surely it's worth a try? He's smaller than them, maybe it means he is harder to catch or something! Maybe if he just jumps across the table…

"Which is why we're here now, of course," Zhao De adds and raises his hand. The glint of metal makes Shen Yuan look back at him, and he freezes when he realizes what it is.

Scissors.

Shen Yuan puts his hand on his hair without thinking, staring at the simple tools in Zhao De's hand. His lungs feel weird, as if someone tied ropes around them too tightly. He can't breathe.

Zhao De's smile is an ugly thing.

To the side, Ming Fan falters, eyes wide with surprise. It's a small thing that Shen Yuan can't focus on, not now when his heart is making a valid attempt to beat itself out of his chest.

"Come, Shidi. Let this one help you," Zhao De says and steps closer.

Shen Yuan launches himself across the table.

Quick as a viper, Zhao De grabs his ankle. Shen Yuan hits the table's edge with his chin, biting his tongue as he hisses. He feels himself being dragged back, and Shen Yuan grabs hold of the table and *clings* to it, tries to use his free foot to blindly kick at Zhao De's face. Another yank forces him to let go and then there's a hand on his neck, pressing him down like a disobedient dog, except then Zhao De's hand moves from holding to *touching.* Tracing the back of Shen Yuan's neck, the uneven skin he must have felt. He pays no mind to Shen

Yuan's struggles.

"What's this?" the older boy asks and grabs him by the hair instead. His scalp burns as he squirms fruitlessly, head held up by that grip alone. He feels like he might throw up. He claws at the hand holding him, and is promptly rewarded with being slammed back down.

"What's wrong?" Cui Wenyan asks, sidling closer. Ming Fan hovers by the door, a blurry outline as the pain makes Shen Yuan's eyes tear up.

"Our Shizun is so practical," Zhao De says, and fuck, *shit fuck shiiiit, shut up shut up–* "selling his bastard child. Look, it's a slave brand."

"Shizun would not trade slaves," Ming Fan protests, and Shen Yuan almost giggles hysterically. Shen Qingqiu visits brothels and murders whoever he hates but no, of course he wouldn't trade *slaves.*

"Then the mongrel's mother did," Zhao De says, the snip of blades ringing out into the room. Shen Yuan's breath catches in his throat.

"S-Stop," he chokes out and then there's a tug on his hair, a different kind and the sound of blades and Shen Yuan chokes as tresses of black are thrown down in front of him.

"This one wouldn't want to leave it unfinished," Zhao De mocks. Cui Wenyan laughs. Ming Fan steps closer.

"Shidi," Ming Fan says, "Zhao De," he then corrects, as if to ensure everyone knows who he is speaking to in a room full of Shidi, "cutting hair is *not* a disciplinary punishment!"

More hair is cut.

"Zhao De!"

"Shixiong," the fucking *asshole* replies, and oh, Shen Yuan thinks, he's crying. He hates crying. He kicks feebly again, but someone grabs his ankle and holds him still. It's been a long time since he felt this small.

He hates it.

"Shixiong," Zhao De says, "I can't stop *now.* It would be disrespectful to Shidi, who is behaving and holding still."

"You're disrespecting *me* right now!"

Clip, clip. More hair is thrown to where he can see, and Shen Yuan can feel how bare his neck already is. The brand will be visible to everyone and there's- the way Zhao De keeps holding him by his hair, the way it tugs at his scalp and he can't, *he can't.*

The heat within gathers and *explodes.*

He slams into Zhao De, who in turn slams into the wall. The table lies in splinters from where Shen Yuan released his qi. Ming Fan and Cui Wenyan gape at them both.

Shen Yuan coughs. He tries to get up, knees weak, and when Zhao De grabs at him with a snarl, he whips his head around and *bites.* The soft skin of Zhao De's hand is far easier to pierce than the War God of Bai Zhan Peak. Shen Yuan tastes blood.

Zhao De swears loudly and then Shen Yuan is pressed to the floor, kicking and snarling, something wild bursting inside of him and he manages to kick Zhao De once in the face before he is pinned down again.

"What is happening?"

The voice is cold and cutting. Everything stops; Shen Yuan glares at the doorway, iron in his mouth as he meets the green eyes of Shen Qingqiu. Zhao De presses his face harder against the floor as he shifts, and Shen Yuan has the half-mind to snap his teeth at him. He already bit him once, after all. He could do it again.

"Shizun!" Ming Fan exclaims and offers a bow, "this one can explain!"

Shen Qingqiu does not look away from Shen Yuan.

"Do so," he says, voice horribly soft, nothing like comfort but something else, "and release the child." There is a pause, an expectation in the air. Zhao De hesitates.

Shen Qingqiu snaps his fan closed.

The pressure moves away; Shen Yuan hurries to sit up, hand clutching at his nape. He curls up there, eyeing them all, feeling that strange *wildness* within, his heart thumping like the beat of rabbit feet in a chase.

Ming Fan puts the blame on Zhao De.

Chapter End Notes

SY, making snowmen: and then Naruto cradled Sasuke's lifeless form in his arms...
LBH: nooo! Sasuke is DEAD!?
SY: ssh I'm still telling the story!!

someone should've told Zhao De about the Biting Incident a few weeks prior hm?

Friendodo drew amazing fanart of Chapter 5, with Binghe and Yuan biting Liu Qingge! pls go check it out and give them lots of love :D

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Child kneels.

Shadows flicker across the child's face. The fireplace crackles, soft and low, and Shen Qingqiu watches as Shen Yuan shifts and adverts his eyes, a vicious frown pulling at his mouth. There are bruises blooming on his face and faint smears of blood on his lips.

Never have they looked so similar.

Shen Yuan has yet to pull down his hood from when they left the classroom; hiding the damage Zhao De made, no doubt. As if Shen Qingqiu did not see plenty of it already. He scoffs and ignores how the child twitches, instead holding his hand out as he sits down far too close for both their comfort. He would rather have the table between them.

The Child stares.

"Hand," Shen Qingqiu snaps, and feels faint amusement when Shen Yuan's glare grows sharper. He sneers back at the child, "this master wishes to know if you are to suffer a qi deviation in *my* home. If you break my furniture, you will pay for it yourself."

With obvious reluctance, Shen Yuan holds out his hand.

Shen Qingqiu grabs the wrist and yanks him that bit closer, ignoring how it makes the boy hiss. He extends his senses, touching upon the child's meridians. It is a simple examination. He is well aware that only those of Qian Cao Peak are able to truly find the signs, subtle or obvious. But Shen Qingqiu only wishes to know if there is an immediate threat.

The boy had blasted a table into splinters, and Shen Qingqiu does not know if it was intended or an accident fueled by desperation.

But he detects nothing of note and lets go. Shen Yuan yanks his hand back, cradling his wrist against his chest and remains mulishly silent as he glances around the house given to all Qing Jing Peak Lords.

Shen Qingqiu watches him for a moment in turn.

He looks tiny, but no longer meek. Shen Qingqiu does not think of a frightened rabbit when he looks down on him now. Not after having seen him bite Zhao De, nor the destruction wrought upon the classroom he found them in. A feral little creature. Biting and clawing, eyes wild and blood on his teeth as he snarled.

It had not been a pleasant sight to walk in on.

Shen Qingqiu smooths out his face and taps his fan against the table to make the child look at him once more. He watches as Shen Yuan shrinks back, eyes going to the fan and back to him in a quick, abortive movement. The hood lets him hide, the shadows deep. There is the glint in his eyes as the fire dances. Like a kitten hiding in an alleyway.

“Show me,” Shen Qingqiu says.

“... show what?” Shen Yuan replies, the tilt to his mouth stubborn now.

“Your hair, obviously,” Shen Qingqiu says. Shen Yuan does not yield like an obedient disciple. He scowls and settles further back, eyes drifting towards the door. Shen Qingqiu narrowed his eyes in turn. “You may leave if you wish,” he tells the child, “but all will see the mess you have become. I wonder what that little *friend* of yours would say. What punishments must we give him this time, hm, for attacking another disciple? Laps do not seem *effective.”*

“Fine!” Shen Yuan spits, and Shen Qingqiu is finally able to believe the boy was of the streets now. There is that bitter sharpness to him, the restless fidgeting of one ready to run.

The Child pushes his hood back.

It is a choppy mess. Zhao De began to cut from the middle, baring Shen Yuan’s neck first, and was unable to finish his work before the boy retaliated. Black tufts stand out in uneven rows, interrupted by long, untouched locks of hair that have just begun to touch Shen Yuan’s back. It leaves his thin neck vulnerable, making the boy appear even smaller than before.

The slave brand is a vicious red.

It is of a delicate design. A lotus flower, of all things. Expensive. The children would not have been kept on the street as beggars, unlike how Shen Jiu spent his childhood, but rather kept close to entice richer patrons. A slave is a slave, however, and Shen Qingqiu knows better than to assume a *clean* slave is treated better than a *dirty* one.

The brand looks fresh, which means it must have been made by a rogue cultivator. It does not look like the kind of brand one is able to simply ignore; a brand made to never heal, that much easier to notice if the slave tries to run. It would explain why the boy guards his neck so warily. Shen Qingqiu wrinkles his nose at it.

He glances back at the child’s face and recoils when he sees the tears running down Shen Yuan’s cheeks. The boy is biting his lip and staring down at his hands, clearly trying very hard to not cry and utterly failing as his shoulders shake.

“Stop that,” Shen Qingqiu demands and is rewarded with a sob. He huffs, knowing better than to smack the child with the fan but is, nevertheless, sorely tempted to do exactly that. Only the threat of his table breaking in another qi blast holds him back. “You did not cry once on the way here. Why *now?* Stop it.”

Shen Yuan hiccups a sob instead.

“I hate you,” the boy cries, which is hardly surprising. Shen Yuan’s face scrunches up, clumsy hands wiping at the falling tears, “I hate *this!* E-Everyone is gonna k-know now… B-Binghe going to *see…”*

“Your little friend no doubt already knows about *that,”* Shen Qingqiu says in a cold voice, gesturing at the brand, ignoring how the child flinches away from him at the movement, “with how stuck to your side he is. Unless you mean the hair.”

The child cries harder. It appears that the hair is, indeed, the problem.

Shen Qingqiu grimaces. He looks around, because he does not want to see the child crying. The fat tears and the snotty nose is *hardly* endearing, and he hates that their faces are so similar. He knows for a fact *he* never cried like that. He would have sooner died in a gutter.

However, he brought the child to the house for a reason. He cannot kick the child out so soon; he had sent Ming Fan and the others away for the moment, to await their punishments. He needs the time to solve the *situation.* So the child must stay, but for that to happen, the child must calm down. Shen Qingqiu thinks back to a time where all he needed was a brick to shut up the snotty brats on the streets and holds back a sigh.

A flick of his fingers brings paper and supplies to write with. He dips the brush in ink and begins to do so.

The abrupt change gives immediate results; the child’s crying lower in volume. He ignores how Shen Yuan stares at him, at how the boy pulls his hood back up to hide the state of his hair.

When Shen Yuan dares to lean closer to see what he is writing, Shen Qingqiu makes direct eye contact.

The boy flinches back once more; but this time, there is no sobbing.

“Nosy, are you?” he asks scathingly, and smiles in dark amusement when the child dares to glare at him. It is hardly threatening; not with how puffy the boy’s eyes are from crying.

“Why’s Zhao De’s name on there?” Shen Yuan has the nerve to ask.

“If you remember your manners, perhaps I will answer. I have already let you be disrespectful for too long. Do not push it.”

Shen Yuan glowers at him; but with an effort, the child manages to stiffly kneel properly, head held high.

“This disciple apologizes,” he says. It is an awful lie.

“Hm,” is Shen Qingqiu’s reply. He writes down Cui Wenyan’s name next. The child remains

where he is, but there is that expectant air. The eagerness; like when Yue Qingyuan clearly wishes to speak after a Peak Meeting. But this time, Shen Qingqiu does not plan to leave before anyone can stop him. He waits for the child.

“... w-what is Shizun writing?”

“Punishments.”

That earns him a twitch. Shen Qingqiu glances towards the child. The green eyes are wide and the boy’s lips are parted in surprise. He looks ridiculous. Shen Qingqiu stares until the child closes his mouth.

“For me?”

“Do you see your name on there?” Shen Qingqiu asks, voice mocking.

“No. I mean, no, this one does not.” There is a pause. “Neither do I see Shixiong Ming Fan’s name.”

“Head disciple Ming Fan will not be officially punished.”

Shen Yuan stares and Shen Qingqiu stares back.

The world has been tilted; he doesn't know how else to describe it. Ever since he let that warmth in his chest burst out, fingertips still tingling from it, it is like the world itself shook and settled unsteadily.

The taste of blood lingers on his tongue.

He doesn’t want to think about his hair or the brand that always leaves his neck sore and aching, nor does he want to think about how Zhao De’s fingers traced the scarring of it upon first noticing it. There is something terrible waiting for him if he thinks too much of it, he’s sure, and he doesn’t want to fucking *cry* again. He’s not an actual baby, and crying in front of the Scum villain himself is just asking for pain.

Except Shen Qingqiu isn’t punishing him.

“Why not?” Shen Yuan asks, voice sharper than he wants, but it’s hard to lock it all away again. That, too, was unleashed when he blasted the table into smithereens. (he tries to not think about how cool that was) This desire to bite with his words, even at those above him.

“Ming Fan attempted to stop it,” Shen Qingqiu replies, though the narrowing of his eyes are clear.

Be respectful.

“Shixiong did not do so very *well,* Shizun,” Shen Yuan bites out. He watches as the corner of Shen Qingqiu’s tilted mouth twitches upwards.

“So what would you suggest then?” is shot back.

“Ants,” Shen Yuan blurts out.

Shen Qingqiu blinks at him.

“Elaborate,” the man says, the brush put to the side. Having his full attention makes Shen Yuan’s heart tremble.

“... p-push him into a pile of ants…?”

Saying it out loud, Shen Yuan cringes. He does *not* actually want to do that. He is only quoting *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* which had been filled with vengeance, sure, but he also didn’t want Ming Fan actually *dead.* Especially not in such a slow, painful way.

“You’re a vicious little thing, aren’t you?” Shen Qingqiu says.

“I’m not- *this one* is not being serious,” Shen Yuan reluctantly admits, nails digging into his palms before he wipes his hands against his pants, forcing himself to relax. It’s a difficult task. There is a fine tremor going through him, like someone is plucking on the strings of his soul.

“Then be serious,” Shen Qingqiu says, utterly merciless, “if you are to have an opinion, make it an honest one. Cui Wenyan. What punishments would you give him? *Think.”*

Shen Yuan glares, but hurries to avert his eyes when Shen Qingqiu’s gaze grows cold with warning. He fiddles instead with the sleeves of his uniform. Reaches up to tug on his hood, a simple addition to all winter robes. It stays where it is, hiding his shitty haircut from the world.

What *would* he want Cui Wenyan to suffer through?

He thinks of *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* Luo Binghe was tied up and whipped, beaten and insulted. He had been given physical scars that only healed once he unlocked his demon blood.

Shen Yuan tries to think of Cui Wenyan suffering the same and he can’t.

He doesn’t like disciplinary abuse. It’s a harsh realization to have, with his hair a mess and after nearly a year of bullying and all the years before he entered the sect. Despite it all, he

does not want Cui Wenyan whipped. He does not want a child, however older than him he is, beaten. But he still wants *something*.

Cui Wenyan is turning fifteen soon, and he is one of those who shall go to Wan Jian Peak to find the sword of his soul. It is a fact he has been deeply excited about, enough that even Shen Yuan hasn't escaped his rambles on the subject.

"No sword," Shen Yuan blurts out, looking up once more. "That is- I mean- *this one* means. Disciple Cui Wenyan should not be allowed to visit Wan Jian Peak this year." Shen Qingqiu simply watches. Shen Yuan has the odd sense that the man is disappointed in his lack of creativity. "And… to do all my chores…?"

"Hm," the man replies and writes it down below Cui Wenyan's name.

Shen Yuan stares.

He had thought the man was not asking for *actual suggestions,* but rather to make a point that he knew best. To mock Shen Yuan as a small punishment in itself, for whatever reason he would punish him for.

And yet; Shen Qingqiu writes it down.

No visiting Wan Jian Peak for two years, and to do all of Shen Yuan's chores for three months.

What.

What.

"Zhao De."

Shen Yuan flinches.

"Zhao De," Shen Qingqiu repeats, and then he waits. For a moment, Shen Yuan watches him. They eye each other, like it's a stand-off.

"... yes?" he finally asks, and Shen Qingqiu rolls his stupid evil eyes.

"I am not repeating myself again."

Oh.

Shen Yuan looks down at Zhao De's name. He clutches at his robes and doesn't want to think about why Zhao De needs to be punished. He almost wants to let it go rather than think about it a moment longer.

But what would that do?

He thinks back to everything Zhao De has done. He was always the one taking it that step too far. Always the one Shen Yuan avoided the most. He imagines the boy growing up into a proper Cultivator. Would anyone know what to expect from that?

Zhao De has soft, black hair and dark brown eyes and a noble face.

People would assume he is trustworthy, because he looks like it. Only his cruel smile would give it away and it's not always *there.* They would think he would do them no harm, but he would. Shen Yuan is sure of *that* now. He imagines the revenge Zhao De would take on him. On Binghe. The boy, just like Cui Wenyan, is meant to receive a sword in Spring.

Shen Yuan swallows.

"Out," he whispers, then clears his throat. "K-Kick him out. Of the sect, I mean." The words taste bitter. They are difficult to get out. Being kicked out of a sect is the worst thing that could ever happen. It's worse than death, or so some claim. It is worse than any corporal punishment.

It's difficult to say but it *feels* right.

"Zhao De is from a noble family," Shen Qingqiu says. The words make Shen Yuan run cold. He stares at Zhao De's name and the empty space below it, "they will demand an explanation."

Shen Yuan tugs at his hood, pulls it down further to hide his face even more.

"Is this not enough?" he asks, the words acid on his tongue, biting at the air like he was snapping his teeth at it. Shen Yuan can't force it back.

"It should be," Shen Qingqiu replies, and Shen Yuan dares to glance up at the man. Eyes that mirror his stares back, "but we could grow your hair back."

What?

"What?" he whispers, then sits up straighter, "like- now? Right now?"

"Yes, *obviously,"* Shen Qingqiu says, tone less than pleasant, and Shen Yuan narrows his eyes in turn. Shen Qingqiu ignores him as he continues, "it is a simple thing to do at this moment. However, our reasoning to force Zhao De out of the sect would be weak. The brat has enough influence among his peers to circumvent most things and his family enough power among other nobles that it would be bothersome. They would not accept it simply ' *because I said so'* even from myself."

Shen Yuan sat back and bit at his bottom lip in thought.

So basically, he could get rid of his shitty haircut now but run the risk of letting Zhao De stay on the Peak. None would know of the slave brand unless the others spoke of it- which they likely would- but he would have his hair. Having long hair was *good.* He would stand out less

and people would not assume he was a damn criminal.

Or he could let his hair stay the way it was.

For proof.

For the greater fucking good.

All at the cost of humiliating himself.

"Think," Shen Qingqiu says when Shen Yuan can't speak for a moment too long, "I shall prepare tea." The Peak Lord gets up and Shen Yuan holds very, very still as the man brushes past him.

He stares down at his hands. He looks up enough to stare at Zhao De's name instead. At the punishments neatly written by Cui Wenyan's name.

Binghe should be done with his chores by now.

The clinking of porcelain being set down has him flinching; Shen Yuan glares at Shen Qingqiu for it, feeling ridiculous as he does up until he sees how the man's lips twitch into an almost smile, cruel and amused.

Shen Yuan's glare deepens up until Shen Qingqiu picks up the teapot; it is a simple brown, with the pale lines of a dragon carved into it. He remembers how Shen Qingqiu threw tea on Luo Binghe for *existing* and braces himself.

But the man only pours tea into matching cups.

"Your constant twitching is pathetic," Shen Qingqiu says.

"Shut up."

"I *will* punish you for further disrespect," Shen Qingqiu says, voice now soft with warning, "pity only goes so far. Do not test me."

Shen Yuan's hands tremble as he picks up the cup of tea, and he doesn't know if it is from pure fucking fury or because of that weird tension within, or how his fingertips still tingle from the qi blast of before. It feels like it just happened. It feels like it was weeks ago.

He drinks the stupid tea and hates that it tastes good.

"This one," Shen Yuan says, words slow and clipped to the point he feels like a stuttering printer, "will… keep. The haircut."

"Good."

Shen Yuan's eyes itch. He rubs at them and hopes it's not more tears trying to pour out,

because he's already embarrassed himself enough for the day.

"I will put a talisman on you for the brand."

"Wait, what?" Shen Yuan snaps his head back up, staring with wide eyes at Shen Qingqiu. The man sips on his tea and puts the cup down in slow, unhurried movements even as he meets Shen Yuan's eyes. His gaze is sharp, far more probing than before. Like a challenge.

"We look too alike," Shen Qingqiu says, "I am not going to have it known that someone whose face resembles mine was a *slave.* Certainly even you are capable of imagining how it will affect my reputation. So I shall break the spell upon that brand and I shall ensure it stays invisible until Zhao De is off the Peak."

"There's… there's a spell on it?" Shen Yuan asks, feeling oddly dazed. It's like the Scum villain whacked him with a wooden mallet. His hand drifts to the back of his neck, to where the brand always aches. Is that why? He has never been able to see it. It's been there since he was little, a thing to press and prod and *claw* at whenever they decided he needed to be punished. It is a hurt he has done his best to shield.

"The spell ensures that it won't heal. It is a simple spell to break. Remove your hood."

The tone is harsh. Shen Yuan has the feeling that the man before him has begun to lose patience. So he pulls the hood back down, shivering as the air hits his bare neck. The fire makes it warm, but it is still an odd sensation when he has spent so much time hiding it from view.

Shen Qingqiu grabs the back of his neck and Shen Yuan hisses in protest, trying to twist free out of pure reflex. Shen Qingqiu squeezes in warning. Forcing Shen Yuan to stay still; though he is so tense he feels like he vibrates with it.

It hurts; the pressure is heavy, and there is a warmth that burns rather than soothes as Shen Qingqiu presses his palm against the brand. It makes Shen Yuan's eyes itch even more, stinging as he blinks rapidly to keep any tears back. He won't cry again, he *won't.*

A snap makes him yelp. Like a string was cut, as if someone is pulling threads loose from cloth. Shen Qingqiu's hand leaves and Shen Yuan hunches as he covers his neck with his own, wheezing.

"There," the asshole says, "I shall make the talisman."

Fucking *bitch.*

(+500 F-points! Wow! Big achievement!)

… still a fucking bitch.

Shen Yuan watches as his master disappears amongst the snow. Off to inform the culprits of their punishments, the green of his robes standing out like poison against the snow.

The sun has begun to set and Shen Yuan stands frozen outside the bamboo house. His feet feel too heavy to move. He tugs at the hood, once again hiding his shitty haircut.

The talisman clings to his skin. It rests between his shoulder blades, a brush of paper he can barely feel. It's almost comforting if he ignores who made it.

Shen Yuan still can't make himself move.

That's how Luo Binghe finds him in the end. Standing like a hunched over statue by their Shizun's door, staring at his feet and hugging himself.

"Yuan!" Binghe gasps and then there's a hug, arms tight around him and so sudden that he stumbles back. Shen Yuan only tenses for a moment before he melts into it.

His eyes sting once more and he's so fucking tired of being *thirteen.*

"Binghe," he mumbles, reminded of being dug out of the snow. Luo Binghe is hugging him almost as tightly as back then. At least the protagonist doesn't seem to mind that he has a pathetic sidekick.

"Are you alright?" Luo Binghe asks, voice threadbare with worry, "I couldn't find you *anywhere,* did Shen Qingqiu do anything?"

"Shizun," Shen Yuan corrects, deciding he was too tired to put much effort into it. He leans heavily against Luo Binghe. More so when his friend tries to push him away, to look him over in true Binghe *'I'm worried'* fashion. When was the demon lord such a worrywart, anyway? Like hell he will let him see what a mess he is!!! No!!!

"Shizun," Luo Binghe obediently says and then pries Shen Yuan off of him despite Shen Yuan's best efforts. He tries to duck away, hide his face and the split lip he has, the bruises and–

Utterly fails as Luo Binghe gasps and cups Shen Yuan's face between his hands. Like a sandwich. Haha. Idiot sandwich.

Shen Yuan's face burns with shame. He doesn't look at the other boy. Instead he tugs at his sleeves, bunches them up to protect his hands from the biting air and averts his eyes as much as possible as Luo Binghe just *stares.* Binghe's hands are cold against Shen Yuan's cheeks. Like ice against lava with how much he's burning up from the pure humiliation of it all.

Slowly, Luo Binghe pulls the hood down.

“It’s nothing,” Shen Yuan says after Luo Binghe stands frozen for too long, the silence deafening. He swears even the wind decided to shut up, “it’s fine! This one is *fine.* ” Binghe says nothing. Shen Yuan dares to dart a peek at him and *blanches.*

Luo Binghe’s face is white with shock. His eyes are wide and darker than a bottomless well and Shen Yuan can feel Binghe’s fingers twitch before they slowly touch what remains of the shitty haircut. He holds still even as he wants to turn away. Lungs are back to being useless and his heart decides he hasn’t run enough fucking marathons for the day. He doesn’t tell Luo Binghe to back off even though the touch has him shuddering.

“Binghe?” he asks, hating how weak his voice comes out.

Immediately Luo Binghe snatches his hand away.

“I’m sorry,” Luo Binghe says, and then his eyes grow wet and *shit. No!!* Stop that!!! Shen Yuan stares helplessly as the protagonist’s cheeks become wet with tears, hands hovering as if he doesn’t know where to put them, “I’m sorry, Yuan! I should’ve been there,” he cries, clutching at his robes instead, “I could have stopped him!”

“It’s… it’s alright, Binghe-”

“I should’ve known Shen Qingqiu would do this,” the boy sobs and wait a fucking second.

“Shizun didn’t do this.”

Luo Binghe sniffles and blinks at him.

“What?”

“Shizun didn’t cut my hair,” Shen Yuan says, and ew, why was he *defending* the Scum villain? His neck still feels all weird and numb-hot-itchy from whatever the man did to break the spell on the brand, “that was Zhao De.”

“Zhao De?”

Shen Yuan nods.

This, surprisingly, does not calm down Luo Binghe.

He manages to calm down Luo Binghe.

Kind of.

He has to hold the other boy's hand in a firm grasp to ensure there won't be any running away to fight Zhao De. It is a comfort for himself too, loathe as he is to admit. It finally helps Shen Yuan to walk towards the dormitories and it helps him resist the urge to run and hide away where no one will ever see him.

The hood is back up but he carefully doesn't think about how he has to remove his outer robes for when it is time to sleep. He does not think about the whispers and stares that will follow.

Ning Yingying takes one look and immediately bursts into tears.

"Shidi!" She cries, and Shen Yuan shies away from her attempts at hugging, pathetically relieved when Luo Binghe plays bodyguard and blocks it with his body. Ning Yingying for once seems to see it as the *No* it is and instead stands before them, crying loudly. She does it the way small children do. Head fully tilted back and wailing.

Shen Yuan pretends he doesn't see how all the other disciples stop and stare. Instead he does his best attempt at a comforting smile (a failure; he can feel how weak it is) and very awkwardly gives Ning Yingying a pat on the shoulder.

"I'm going to punch him," Ning Yingying sobs.

"I'm going to *kill* him," Luo Binghe murderously says.

"No, wait," Shen Yuan frowns and gives Binghe's hand a warning squeeze, "how- that is, does everyone know already? Really?" He had kind of hoped it would take longer.

"Shizun kicked him out for being so cruel," Ning Yingying says, scrubbing at her eyes until they look painfully red and puffy, "a-and he said his parents would have *w-words* , and I don't c-care! He was so mean to Shidi! A-Yuan!" she wails, and Shen Yuan eyes her messy braids and how red her knuckles are and wonders if maybe she did already punch Zhao De.

"It will grow out again?" he awkwardly offers.

Luo Binghe looks suspiciously close to tears again.

Ning Yingying bursts into them.

Ming Fan walks past them, rubbing his shoulder and giving Ning Yingying a wide berth and avoiding Shen Yuan's eyes.

Seems like she punched Ming Fan instead.

Good, he thinks, fingers tingling and teeth itching.

Shen Yuan gasps awake.

His heart beats out of his chest and his throat feels like it has a noose around it. He clutches at his neck, at the brand hidden from sight and does his very best to stifle his sobs and digs his nails into it, a reminder of what it is even if no one can fucking *see it* right then.

Around him, everyone sleeps. Slits of pale moonlight paint the floor. It is nothing like the dream he had, and yet it's already slipping through his fingers. Terror quickly fading to something he can't touch or see, which is nearly as horrible as remembering it perfectly. There was- red. So much red, and sharp nails and the gentle tug on his hair before–

"Yuan?"

Shen Yuan flinches at the whisper. He turns, feeling that odd warmth within and clenches his hands into fists and hopes he doesn't release a blast of qi again. That would be stupid. So fucking *stupid.*

Luo Binghe meets his eyes.

He can't look away. He sits frozen, staring at Luo Binghe. The protagonist's eyes glint in the darkness as he sits up, as he quietly gets out of bed. Shen Yuan holds still as he tracks the other boy with his eyes. He doesn't know if he even breathes until Binghe sits next to him, shoulders bumping.

"Are you alright?" his friend whispers and Shen Yuan blinks as Luo Binghe grabs his hand. The squeeze is grounding and comforting, and he thinks maybe he squeezes too hard back. He thinks maybe his nails dig in a bit too much; but Binghe doesn't even blink.

Shen Yuan stares and struggles and stays quiet, quiet even as he feels like he is suffocating.

"Can I hug you?" Binghe asks.

He should say no; he's already been stupidly childish and pathetic. It doesn't matter that he is a child, that he is aware of how differently he reacts to things *because* he has a child's brain. He should still not cling to Binghe in such an embarrassing way. Hugging the golden thighs is a metaphor, not something he should actually fucking *do.* He should say no.

He's scared.

“I don’t know,” Shen Yuan mumbles.

So they sit in the dark.

Not a day passes before the dark robes of Yue Qingyuan are seen on Qing Jing Peak.

It seems the man is willing to ignore his banishment from the Peak of Scholars if there is such a serious incident. He arrives with thinned lips and a furrowed brow, handsome face very much settled into a grim expression. His steps are quick enough that Shen Yuan wonders why the man isn’t flying in on his sword, only to remember that Yue Qingyuan *never* unsheathes his sword for such things.

Shen Yuan peeks around a stone pillar at the man and pulls at his hat. It’s a ridiculously fluffy thing, all white fur and leather, but it’s soft and it is warm and he can tuck the remains of his hair into it. He can almost pretend no one knows what happened if he *really* fucking tries. Or that the hat is something Ning Yingying tearfully let him borrow, meaning it’s a *girl’s* hat.

It is not that Shen Yuan doesn’t know how important hair *is* in this time period. Obviously. He knows that it’s a massive dishonor to cut your hair, a blatant violation to not only yourself but also your entire damn bloodline. And it *was* upsetting- who wants to get a haircut like this? But there is a reason why not even stylishly short hair is in fashion.

But even if he has spent thirteen years in this world (or maybe eight, if he really *did* just randomly spawn in one day at five years old) he still isn’t upset about that part. He’s too much of a modern man, maybe, even now.

It’s just… the way shit happened.

He just wishes everyone stopped being so dramatic about it. Shen Yuan doesn’t *want* to think about it! He wants to move the fuck on, because even just waiting for Zhao De’s family to respond with an outcry of protests is nervewracking. Having the entire Peak stare at him like he is dying isn’t helping at all.

The only one who behaves somewhat normally is Shen Qingqiu.

Which is one way to say the man is still a fucking asshole.

“Xiao-Yuan,” Yue Qingyuan says and Shen Yuan yelps as suddenly the man is right in front of him. He stumbles back and promptly falls into a pile of snow, sending it all flying in a whirlwind of cold confetti. His cheeks burn and he hurriedly scrambles back up, ducking

away from Yue Qingyuan's attempts at helping him.

"This one greets Shibo!" he gets out, offers a bow and almost forgoes all manners to just run for it instead.

"Xiao-Yuan," the man frets, and hold on, Shen Yuan thought that was an accidental slip to Shen Qingqiu only. Does the man *actually* think of him as little Yuan? He thinks he wants to die. This is more humiliating than the haircut! "This one had heard of what happened. Are you alright?"

Yue Qingyuan's eyes trace the bruises that have turned an ugly green on Shen Yuan's face. He blushes and hides the biggest one with his hand.

"Yes, Shibo, this one is fine," he says and it's *almost* the truth. Never mind that he didn't manage to sleep because of… nightmares. Ugh. "Shizun is… Shizun is handling it?"

It doesn't come out as very convincing.

Yue Qingyuan relaxes. It is the opposite reaction of what Shen Yuan personally would have done and he *knows* what Shen Qingqiu is planning. The man had looked almost gleeful as he had told Shen Yuan how they would use the humiliation to punish some rich assholes.

Ning Yingying insists Shizun is the best.

Shen Yuan hasn't told her he's pretty sure Shen Qingqiu is only there to verbally murder people for his own amusement. Shen Yuan is just a good excuse, sharing a face and all that nonsense. He doesn't want to think about it too much.

"I am pleased to hear so," Yue Qingyuan says, voice soft and warm. But there is a worry still, and Shen Yuan stares up at the man and hopes he won't ask- "this master would like to hear your story of what happened. Would you like to accompany me to your Shizun as you tell me?"

There is a tiny bit of leeway. Shen Yuan knows that if he says no, Yue Qingyuan will let him slip away. He knows this as surely as he knows that snow is white and the sky is blue.

The man's eyes are comforting and understanding and maybe a tiny bit furious. Shen Yuan stares at him and considers. He looks like a dependable big brother. He thinks about Shen Qingqiu and how pissed off the man would be if he knew Shen Yuan spoke with the sect leader. Spite brews in his heart and Shen Yuan straightens.

"I bit him," he blurts out, and Yue Qingyuan smiles in that same kind of helpless way Luo Binghe sometimes does when Shen Yuan is funny.

"Tell me more," he says and the story tumbles out.

He is rewarded with 100 F-points.

His blanket doesn't get stolen anymore.

Shen Yuan still struggles to sleep; more now than before, because even though Zhao De was kicked out days ago and the bullying has stopped, even though everyone seems to pity him and carefully avoids making trouble for him– there is that phantom feeling of a hand pressing down on Shen Yuan's neck.

The reminder of the tugging, the way his scalp stung.

His neck is bare and cold and even though the brand is hidden and finally has begun to heal, it doesn't change the fact that *he* knows it's there.

The fear of someone seeing it is enough to wake him every night and he keeps forgetting how to breathe.

Luo Binghe wakes up every single time and holds his hand until Shen Yuan doesn't feel like he is about to implode anymore. It's kind of nice. More than once they fall asleep together, getting a light scolding in the mornings for breaking the rules.

Shen Yuan looks so pitiful with his shitty haircut that they never get punished for it.

They are both starting to look a bit too much like pandas, however. Shen Yuan yawns and watches Luo Binghe yawn too. He wonders if the dark circles under his eyes are darker than Binghe's or not. He wonders how much more dreadful *he* looks, all fucked up from the *event* while Luo Binghe only looks terribly, horribly tired.

Shen Yuan doesn't want to keep waking him.

But he also can't sleep in the dormitories.

… there is a woodshed, isn't there?

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: why the fuck were you talking with that disciple
YQY: he offered! :D he let me call him Xiao-Yuan!
SQQ: I'll??? kill you??? AND HIM???
YQY: aw no Xiao-Jiu.... I thought we were saving such emotions for Zhao De :(
SQQ: I can multitask.

Woo! A few hours early update!
Now, I got some news! First of all, I'm going on vacation! This means that while I hope to still update every monday as planned, I will be spending time with family and friends (hopefully, if this weather stops being so Weathery) which means I might be a bit delayed. This should only be for like 2-3 mondays at most, but again I am going to try my very best to upload on Mondays as usual <3

BUT BETTER NEWS!!!

Guys!! Guys there's fanart!!!!!!

Chapter 5: Friendodo drew the attack on LQG <3

Chapter 6:
Friendodo also drew SY having a rough time! He is so upset, poor bby. Someone hug him pls. But also he might try to force those game pieces down the throat of whoever touches him next, hm.
Lady Dysnomia drew amazing portaits of before and after haircut!SY! Oh it is LOVELY!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he blinks awake, the darkness of the night has begun to shift towards a darker blue. He can see it through the slits in the windows of the dormitories when he tilts his head back. There is one right above his bed. When the sun rises, it paints golden lines across his feet before they move further down the room.

It is not yet morning, but Luo Binghe looks towards his sleeping friend and feels hopeful.

Shen Yuan is curled up on his bed, the blanket hiding most of his small frame. It has slipped during the night; enough that if Luo Binghe squints through the darkness, he can make out the shortened ends of Shen Yuan's hair.

The reminder twists at him.

He knows he is angry and he knows he is guilty. Luo Binghe wants to make things right, but once again he is learning the simple lesson of being helpless.

He could not stop his mother from passing; he cannot avenge Shen Yuan, for Zhao De is already gone from the mountain. There is nothing someone like him can do and it *burns*.

All he has been able to do is the too-little gesture of holding his friend's hand when he wakes. Because even a hug can make Shen Yuan tense now, more so when he wakes from his nightmares. Which he now has every night.

It is too small a price to pay. To wake up each night to comfort Shen Yuan for things he couldn't stop.

But tonight, his friend might finally sleep until morning. Luo Binghe smiles as he watches Shen Yuan nuzzle into his pillow, curling up tighter while scrunching up his nose. His hands are twitching endearingly, and Luo Binghe has to resist reaching across the space between their beds to hold his hand in his own, to give it a squeeze until it calms down.

Except–

Luo Binghe furrows his brow and sits up. The cute scrunch to Shen Yuan's nose has become something worrisome as Yuan begins to throw his head back and forth. A hand is going up to paw above him in clumsy, halting movements.

It seems Shen Yuan won't sleep through the night this time either.

Luo Binghe worries at his blanket. He usually doesn't try to wake up Shen Yuan, having learned now that it is best to let people wake naturally from their nightmares. He read it when

he tried to find out about heart demons- Luo Binghe had overheard some of the older disciples speaking of needing to keep an eye on *Little Shen* for such things- and in the book it had warned that those afflicted could accidentally attack those who tried to wake them.

And then Shen Yuan is clawing at his neck, digging his nails into the skin where only Luo Binghe knows a brand is hiding.

“Yuan,” he whispers, carefully getting out of bed because Shen Yuan hates attention and he doesn’t think his friend would want others to see this, “Yuan, I’m here,” and he reaches for the hand Shen Yuan is clawing with, winces as nails dig into his hand instead, hard enough he thinks they might draw blood. Luo Binghe tugs the hand away.

Shen Yuan’s eyes snap open.

There’s a loud *bang* and white light.

Pure instinct has Luo Binghe throwing himself away in time; he hears the splintering of wood and thuds of several disciples falling out of bed, the *sshkt* sound of swords being unsheathed and shouts of warnings as everyone tries to find the threat.

Shen Yuan is sitting up, gasping for breath and hands held out towards where Luo Binghe had just been. There’s white light popping like firecrackers from his hands; they make his green eyes look like they sparkle in the dark. That is the only life to them; Luo Binghe stares at how blank they are and realizes that Yuan hasn’t fully woken up yet.

His chest is heaving and there’s blood underneath his fingernails. Luo Binghe can feel his own hand sting from where he had just barely ripped free in time, and he knows that the blood is his own.

“Yuan,” he attempts, watching those sparking hands twitch in his direction, “it’s Binghe,” he coaxes, crawling closer from where he’s crouched on the floor. Shen Yuan blinks.

“Disciple Luo Binghe,” one of the older disciples snaps, “do *not* get closer!”

“But-!”

“Disciple Shen Yuan is not able to differ between friend and foe. Do *not* get closer unless you want your skull crushed.”

But they’re wrong; Luo Binghe can see how Shen Yuan’s eyes stop being so scarily blank, he can see the glow of his hands dim. When finally Shen Yuan’s eyes focus on him, scared and confused, he ignores the snapping voice of his shixiong.

“Yuan,” he says and gets close enough he can tug Shen Yuan’s blanket up over his head. The smaller boy is quick to clutch at it, one hand shooting out to grab at his hand, as if to make sure Luo Binghe won’t leave. He smiles and nods, and Shen Yuan’s bottom lip trembles.

“Shidi,” the shixiong- Xiang Feng, now when Luo Binghe glances at him- says as he steps

closer to them, “are you calm now?”

Shen Yuan flushes, ashamed, and Luo Binghe glares at Xiang Feng.

“This one apologizes for waking everyone,” Shen Yuan mumbles. There had been groans of complaints in the background once the danger passed; at Shen Yuan’s apology, it all quiets down. Luo Binghe moves his glare towards Cui Wenyan. The older boy looks sullen. Luo Binghe imagines grabbing the remains of his bed to stab the boy with.

But Shen Yuan tugs on him and Binghe will never say no to a hug.

“It is fine, and not your fault,” Xiang Feng sighs, “however, head disciple Ming Fan should go and inform Shizun at once.”

“Right, right. This one was on his way!” Ming Fan says, voice too loud, and Ning Yingying insists on following as well. Luo Binghe keeps an eye on them when they pass, but Shen Yuan doesn’t flinch. He only burrows closer, hiding his face against Luo Binghe’s shoulder before he pushes him away.

Luo Binghe reluctantly lets him go.

Some of the other disciples go back to bed. Others linger, clearly wishing to but unsure what Shen Qingqiu will say once he arrives. Luo Binghe sits next to Shen Yuan and watches as his friend sits up straight and fixes his face into something less fragile. The blanket is still pulled up over his head, hiding his hair. But he is making the effort to appear less scared and Luo Binghe wishes he was strong enough to let Yuan realize he *can* be scared, because Binghe will protect him.

They sit and wait and Binghe pretends he doesn’t see how Yuan fidgets.

His hands feel itchy.

The warmth lingers in them and Shen Yuan very carefully does not look at the broken bed right in front of him. He would much rather look down at his own hands, or at the spider making its odd web in the corner of the ceiling, still refusing to hibernate.

Shen Yuan doesn’t look at the older disciples who are murmuring or trying to settle back down. He dares to sneak a peek at Binghe, though, and nearly dies of a heart attack when Binghe stares right back at him.

His cheeks feel warm and Shen Yuan hurriedly looks away. He feels how the other boy

shuffles closer until their shoulders bump.

Before Luo Binghe can say anything, the door opens and Shen Qingqiu enters the dormitories.

The quiet murmurs disappear entirely as the cold gaze of the Peak Lord looks upon them all. Finally it settles on Shen Yuan, and he holds back a grimace as the man makes his way over.

He looks calm and yet there is the unmistakable air *annoyance,* on the edge of pure fucking anger. Clearly someone isn't a fan of being woken up because of a snotty child's *nightmares*.

Disciples throw themselves out of the way even as they offer bows of respect. It looks like the weirdest attempt at dancing he's ever seen. Shen Qingqiu of course pays no attention to them, nor does he pay attention to Ming Fan and Ning Yingying scuttling behind him. Their whispered bickering is the only sound in the room.

Even that cuts short once Shen Qingqiu comes to a stop before him.

"Hand," he says, and Shen Yuan remembers that same word days ago. He frowns up at the man, whose eyes narrow in turn and- oh shit. Right.

Audience.

Reluctantly, Shen Yuan frees one hand to hold out for inspection. Beside him, Luo Binghe tenses as Shen Qingqiu grabs it a bit too harshly, not quite yanking but still making Shen Yuan bite back a swear. The grasp barely gentles as he takes hold of Shen Yuan's wrist.

Shen Qingqiu's qi washes through him like water; cold and refreshing, gentle in its touch but harsh in its temperature. He shivers but sits still.

A moment of silence; Shen Qingqiu lets him go, and Shen Yuan hurries to tuck his hand back inside the blanket.

"You're fine," the man says, the edges of his voice now *fully* filled with annoyance, but at least he doesn't glare at Shen Yuan. No, instead he looks around the room, does a slow turn and looks at the remains of Luo Binghe's bed. He stares impassively at it. "Whose bed is this?" he asks.

Luo Binghe doesn't say a word. Shen Yuan gives him a confused squint, before deciding that *he* isn't going to let the protagonist be a self-sacrificing idiot, thank you very much.

"It's Luo Binghe's bed, Shizun," he says.

The betrayed look Binghe sends him *almost* makes him laugh.

"Hm."

“... this one broke it, Shizun.”

He is awarded a deadpan stare.

“Obviously,” Shen Qingqiu drawls.

“So… this one wonders if it’s possible that Luo Binghe could sleep in my bed tonight? Until a replacement is found?”

“Does Shen Yuan intend to sleep on the floor?”

“Well, no, Shizun,” he says, absolutely not sweating, nope, “I thought we could share for now. I know it is against the rules, but this one knows he’s… the one who broke the bed. It seems fair.”

Shen Qingqiu stares at him. Shen Yuan holds his breath.

“Fine,” their Shizun says, the way one might say *no,* a complete contradiction that Shen Yuan is going to ignore, actually, “until a replacement is found. Ming Fan,” he snaps, and the head disciple jumps to attention, “ensure a new bed is found tomorrow. Now, unless someone is *actively dying,* this master will retire.”

His glare travels across the room.

No one moves; he gives a sharp nod and leaves as quietly annoyed as he arrived. The great breath of relief that sweeps through the room is comedically loud and Shen Yuan bites back a hysterical giggle.

“I hope you don’t mind sharing,” he whispers to Binghe as everyone begins to crawl back into bed, grateful that Ning Yingying flops down and instantly enters a coma on her own. He kind of worried that she would beg to join them and his bed is *not* big enough for that. And also it would be weird to share a bed with Binghe *and* his future wife.

Luo Binghe looks at him, then back at the remains of his bed. The splinters lay scattered and everyone else is careful to step around it. No one wants to sweep it all up just yet. Shen Yuan figures he will have to do it in the morning; not even pity for the *poor haircutting victim* will get him out of cleaning up a mess he made.

“I don’t mind at all,” Binghe finally says, then cheekily adds, “it’s not like it’s the first time.”

“But this time we have to share *one* blanket.”

“Yuan can have it,” Binghe assures him, “I run very warm.”

“I don’t care if your sustenance is *coal.* We are sharing the blanket.”

Luo Binghe smiles at him helplessly.

“Alright,” he says.

So they settle down; awkwardly they shuffle about until the blanket covers both of them. Shen Yuan thinks he should be more bothered by having to hug so close, but it’s… it’s nice. This way, he can feel Luo Binghe’s chest moving as he breathes. This way, he can pretend that he didn’t almost kill his best friend.

Woodshed, he thinks as he drifts off to sleep, qi blasts exhausting enough to make the almost-murder seem less important than sleep if only briefly. Shen Yuan doesn’t mind as Luo Binghe hugs him close, because the other boy keeps his hands away from his neck, from his hair. He just hugs him like a very skinny teddy bear and Yuan sighs.

They sleep.

The woodshed is too close to the bamboo house.

For ease, probably. Of course the firewood shouldn’t be too far away from any elderly Shizuns who need it for their aching joints. If they had any, that is. Shen Yuan doesn’t know what happened to previous peak lords. It’s not something *Proud Immortal Demon Way* ever mentioned! Did they ascend? Did they just kind of go and retire? A mix? Were they old when they retired or did they all just sign off when it got too boring, so now there’s super powerful old masters running around looking like they are twenty?

He wishes he knew.

The point is, the woodshed is too close to Shen Qingqiu’s house for comfort. But it is also isolated enough he doesn’t think the man will find out. It has a packed dirt floor, just enough space for a skinny thirteen year old and it is *almost* perfect. The fact that it’s a woodshed is of course a massive flaw, but if he has a stupid freakout then he will only blow up firewood no one actually needs.

Binghe has chopped *so much wood* over the past year.

What makes it perfect is that he won’t harm anyone, and he might actually get to sleep without so many people around him. It… will be weird, waking up without Luo Binghe in the bed next to him. He’s gotten used to the protagonist sleeping an arms length away.

But he can do it!

“Are you going to wash your blanket?” Ning Yingying asks and Shen Yuan almost drops said blanket into the snow as he flinches away.

“H-hello, Shijie!” he squeaks. He tugs at the fluffy hat she let him borrow, looks at her red ears and frowns. “Do you want the hat back?”

“No! A-Yuan needs it more,” she huffs, and then Ning Yingying pokes at the blanket again, “isn’t Cui Wenyan meant to do your chores? Are you going to give it to him? Can I come with you? I want to throw snowballs at him, my aim has become *so good.”*

“Oh. Wait. Have you spent these days throwing snowballs at him?”

“And Ming Fan,” Ning Yingying cheerfully admits, “and if Zhao De was here, him too! But I would add a rock in those.”

Holy shit.

“I’m just… this one is not going to do laundry. The blanket is clean.”

“Then where are you taking it?”

Shen Yuan stares at her. Ning Yingying blinks back, her orange ribbons fluttering, her chubby cheeks rosy from the cold. If he tells her, she will tell the whole peak. He has to lie. But she will tell that lie to the whole peak too! Fuck. Shit.

“Um,” he says, “I don’t want to tell you.”

Ning Yingying gasps.

It’s a very theatrical gasp; it reminds him of old romantic drama shows, where things go in slow-motion when people are killed. Her eyes grow big and teary and Shen Yuan takes a step back in horror.

“Don’t do that!” he protests, half-hysterical. He clutches the blanket like a barrier between them, as if it is the solution to the possibly crying girl in front of him. Ning Yingying draws a gulping breath like a toddler before a meltdown.

“Shijie,” Luo Binghe says, swooping in like a fucking *angel,* giving Ning Yingying a look of disapproval, “please be kind to Yuan.”

Eugh. *Pity.*

“Don’t say it like that,” Shen Yuan mutters.

“But he is going somewhere with his blanket and he won’t tell me!” Ning Yingying whines, and the tone of that voice reminds him very much of his little sister demanding *gege share!!!* when they were like *five.*

He does not like it.

“Blanket?” Binghe asks, looking at said blanket. Shen Yuan hugs it tighter.

“... I broke your bed. And they have to make a new one, and they don’t have time for it,” Shen Yuan mumbles, pressing the blanket up so he can hide his face against it, “so you can take mine because I will sleep elsewhere and you’re not invited.”

After a long moment of silence, he dares to take a peek.

Binghe’s sad eyes are far worse than Ning Yingying’s crocodile tears.

“Did I do something wrong?” Binghe asks, and he doesn’t cry. Instead he gets this very sad but *brave* face, as if he is bracing himself for the worst news ever. It’s pure martyr. He looks sadly down at the ground.

“No! No, you did nothing wrong!” Shen Yuan protests, nearly dropping his blanket again as he reaches out to catch Binghe’s hand, “it’s me!”

“You’re going to make A-Luo cry,” Ning Yingying accuses, ruthless and speaking nothing but fucking truth because Luo Binghe just looks *sadder.* The sky itself might just open up to cry the tears Luo Binghe bravely won’t shed.

“Please don’t cry! It’s just, I’m- I’m-!”

There is the tiniest, most shakiest little sigh from Binghe.

Shen Yuan breaks.

“I’m going to sleep in the woodshed!”

Both of them stare at him. Expressions blank as they process his words, and Shen Yuan winces. He considers his escape routes, but they are both blocking the easiest path to the woodshed. Maybe he can find a *different* one? It doesn’t have to be the one Luo Binghe slept in! There’s one near the kitchens too, but then again that one is used much more often so he would for sure get kicked out…

“The woodshed?” Luo Binghe asks, and before Shen Yuan can say anything in return he continues, “the woodshed? The woodshed meant for *wood?* You’re going to sleep in the *woodshed!?”*

Well, you did! He almost snaps back. But that would be insane.

Granted, Luo Binghe is speaking as if Shen Yuan *is* insane.

“Well I can’t hurt anyone then!” he protests, but Binghe is puffing up, glaring disapproving daggers, “and it can’t be that bad! See, I’m bringing my blanket! And- and it will be dry, because no one likes wet wood!”

The last part triggers an explosion.

“THE *WOODSHED,* YUAN!”

“YES THE WOODSHED, *BINGHE!”*

“I’m telling Shizun!” Ning Yingying yells.

“NO!” they both shriek, but it’s too late.

Ning Yingying’s orange ribbons disappear around the corner and they stand staring where she had just been. Slowly, they look towards each other. Shen Yuan frowns. Luo Binghe frowns back.

“You’re not stupid,” his friend says, “but that’s *stupid.”*

“It’s not like I’m taking you with me!” Shen Yuan argues, “it has nothing to do with you! And this way I won’t- won’t blow someone up!”

“But you will be cold! And you will get sick and what if you still have nightmares but now you will be *alone?”*

“Better alone than hurting you,” he snarls, fingers itchy with heat, as if he’s mad but he’s *not.* Especially not with Luo Binghe.

Binghe stops. He takes a moment to look at him, and Shen Yuan bristles. He feels cornered, even though he’s not. He can easily turn around and walk away. He knows Luo Binghe wouldn’t grab him or force him to stay. He knows this stupid, burning *thing* inside of him has no right to be aimed at the protagonist. He *knows* Binghe is just worried.

But he is so fucking tired of all this stupid pity.

They are still holding hands. Shen Yuan yanks his back, and Binghe lets him. He goes back to hugging the blanket with both arms, not sure where to aim all… this. So he just kind of glares.

“I won’t ever let you be alone,” Luo Binghe says.

“I could have killed you!”

“But you didn’t mean to.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Shen Yuan snaps, “I still almost did!”

“Yuan, you can’t sleep in the woodshed. You’re not a… a *dog.”*

Shen Yuan’s hand drifts to the back of his neck. The invisible brand doesn’t hurt much these days, but it will take a long time before the redness fully fades, a long time before he can be without the talisman hiding it from others. He frowns.

“I might as well be.”

“Ridiculous,” Shen Qingqiu says and Shen Yuan shrieks and is promptly rewarded with an expression of deep disgust. He glares furiously back, then remembers why he should *not* do that to the Scum villain and promptly averts his eyes. Luo Binghe offers a stiff bow. Shen Yuan copies him and doesn’t glare at Ning Yingying who lingers behind Shen Qingqiu. She looks very proud of herself. Tattler.

“This one greets Shizun,” he says.

“Hn. Follow. Not you two.”

“Will Shizun tell A-Yuan he’s being silly?” Ning Yingying asks. Shen Qingqiu gives her a little pat on the head and offers a mere nod. She beams, a burst of sunlight on this cold winter day and Shen Yuan has the very childish urge to kick her in the shin as he walks past her.

The snow that has yet to be swept off the path muffles their steps. Shen Yuan doesn’t quite know where to look. Shen Qingqiu’s steps are not hurried nor slow. His robes flow like silk despite the weather surely demanding thick furs; his hair flutters, and Shen Yuan tugs at the girly, fluffy hat on his head and glares.

The bamboo house is warm with the fire crackling. The pile of paperwork is higher on the desk than last time, and Shen Yuan almost wanders over to see if any of it is letters from Zhao De’s family.

“Sit,” Shen Qingqiu says instead, and Shen Yuan sits by the table and hugs his stupid blanket close as Shen Qingqiu sits on the other side far more gracefully than Shen Yuan’s knobbly teenage legs could ever do.

For a moment, they watch the other.

“Zhao De and his parents are due to arrive in two days,” Shen Qingqiu says. The words send a bolt of ice through Shen Yuan’s heart. He feels cold all over from it. He feels pale. But Shen Qingqiu does not seem to care as he simply continues, eyes not looking away from Shen Yuan, “what do you think they will say, if they find out you sleep in the woodshed?”

“What?”

“Do you believe they will think your worth is higher than their son’s? The rumored bastard child of Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu, sleeping in a woodshed, all while their son was unjustly kicked out of the sect? What do you think they will demand upon hearing about such a thing? And they *will* hear it.”

Shen Yuan looks away.

“It would not only affect your reputation, but also myself and this Peak,” Shen Qingqiu says, voice cold and cutting. It is ruthless. There is no pity, no attempt at comfort. He is only

methodically and viciously pointing out what an idiot Shen Yuan is. “I will not tolerate it.”

Shen Yuan swallows.

“Speak.”

“I just… this one, that is.” He struggles. There is silence, and that somehow makes it harder to speak. He digs his fingers into the blanket, wishes he truly *did* have claws so that he could shred it to pieces. “I d-don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Because you lack control.”

“... yes.”

“Has it happened before?”

“W-With Zhao De-”

“So that time, and this time.”

Shen Yuan nods. He feels small. Tiny, even, and he plucks at a thread in the blanket. It’s a plain white thing, given to all disciples. He has heard that the other masters on the peak like to get a personal one when they stop being disciples. Colorful things, or just thick ones. He thinks it would feel nicer to hug one of those.

Shen Qingqiu sighs and Shen Yuan doesn’t flinch. He tugs at the hat instead. His haircut isn’t as bad anymore- he managed to cut off the untouched parts himself, because the idea of anyone else doing it had made his hands all itchy with that burning warmth, though Binghe had been kind enough to tell him when he left too much.

He feels bad about yelling.

“We can’t let the Zhao family think you are worth less. With the rumors around our relationship, the solution is simple.”

It takes a moment for him to process the words.

Shen Yuan sits up straight; he stares at Shen Qingqiu, wide eyed and lips parted with disbelief. Shen Qingqiu frowns back at him, a tight pinch to his tilted mouth.

“I’m *not* your father,” he says, and Shen Yuan slumps, feeling an odd mix of relief and disappointment. Once again the man sighs, “but I will suffer through certain assumptions to ensure I do not ever have to allow a member of the Zhao family onto my Peak ever again. Understood?”

“Is Shizun saying that… we’re going to lie?” Shen Yuan asks.

“We will let them make assumptions of our relationship and I will neither deny nor confirm. Our likeness should be enough. And our *honored* sect leader will attend as well.” He spits the words like an angry cat.

“Is that not a good thing?” Shen Yuan wonders.

“They demanded it.”

Ah. So it was a matter of them not respecting Shen Qingqiu’s authority or some shit like that. Ouch. Shen Yuan eyes him and realizes the man may very well have developed some of his own, personal spite during these letter exchanges.

“So you will take the side-room.”

Wait hold on a fucking *minute.*

“Huh?”

“This master will not repeat himself, you are not a simpleton.” He points with his fan to a door, open and revealing what seems to be a storage area. “You have today to empty it out, this one shall *not* do such a thing. You may ask your *little friend* for assistance.”

Shen Yuan gapes.

Green eyes narrow into daggers.

“Get to it.”

He scrambles to his feet.

At first he tries to do it himself.

The room is thankfully not dusty, and the first few boxes he moves away are small or filled with things that are light and easy to pick up.
But then there are those boxes that are far too heavy for him to pick up, or make sounds like things might *break* if he stumbles. And Shen Yuan is not a graceful child. With his luck, it will be valuable artifacts that will earn him a punishment if he breaks any.

Shen Qingqiu ignores his glares as he passes by, the man focused on his paperwork. The way he stamps some of them with his seal shows an aggression that has Shen Yuan hurry to look

away in fear that the Peak Lord will try and bash his head in with the seal alone.

So he needs help.

The idea of asking Binghe makes him feel queasy with guilt. He has never yelled at the protagonist, not once. And he knows Binghe only wants to help, and it should be *easy* to apologize and move on. But he yelled, and now they won't sleep in the same building and it's…

It's weird.

So he asks Ming Fan instead.

The older boy looks like he very badly wants to say no. He arrives by pure coincidence, handing over more scrolls and books to their Shizun. Perhaps that is why he doesn't say no; Shen Yuan watches as Ming Fan sneaks a glance at their Shizun who pointedly ignores them, and he watches the boy wilt.

"This shixiong will help," Ming Fan says, voice pompous in a way that sounds forced. He has dark circles under his eyes that nearly match Shen Yuan's. He wonders if they are kept awake by the same thing.

Ming Fan is an odd one.

He is a bully, obviously, and Shen Yuan still kind of wants to bite him and his fingers still tingle when he thinks too much about the classroom and Zhao De and how Ming Fan protested but didn't *stop it.*

But he has to admit the guy is good at his job.

It's something he has realized over this past year of living on Qing Jing Peak. Ming Fan brags and he bullies and he is smug and proud and tries too hard to seem important. But he, despite being fifteen years old, has a good eye for organization. Moving everything out of the side-room and then getting it all neatly placed in the smaller room *actually* meant for storage (Shen Yuan doesn't know why Shen Qingqiu didn't place it all in there to begin with) goes quickly and neatly.

Ming Fan would probably be good at tetris the way he arranges all the boxes. Shen Yuan can admire that.

"Does Shidi need more help?" Ming Fan asks. He fidgets with the bright red tassel of his sword, throwing glances towards Shen Qingqiu. The man continues to ignore them both.

Shen Yuan thinks he might see what their Shizun meant with no *official* punishment for the guy. RIP, dude. Being ignored and being told you're a disappointment must suck for someone who so clearly wants to be recognized. Shen Yuan almost gives his arm a pat of consolidation.

“This one is grateful for Shixiong’s help,” he says instead and offers a barely respectful bow.

“Then I shall take my leave.”

They both glance towards Shen Qingqiu.

“Dismissed,” is the flat reply.

Ming Fan wilts; he leaves, shoulders slumped and steps slow. Shen Yuan follows and there is no order telling him to stay, so he will take that as a win.

They awkwardly walk down the path together.

“... why did we clean out that room?” Ming Fan asks after a moment of awkward silence. The way he asks it is sharp, but the boy winces as if he immediately regrets his tone.

“Ah… um. Since I have… *difficulties* controlling myself, Shizun decided I should sleep where I can’t hurt others?” That is almost the truth!

Ming Fan whirls around to stare at him. Shen Yuan stumbles back a step at the suddenness of it, eyes wide. He automatically raises his hands up between them, ready to push the older boy away. But Ming Fan stays at a respectful distance.

“Really!?” he demands, voice shrill, “but that’s- that’s supposed to be the head disciple’s room!”

Wow, really???

“Really?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

“Yes! Oh, you’re so lucky…” Ming Fan rubs at his face, looking utterly miserable. Despite the fact that one of them has had a way worse time than the other, he feels an odd sense of pity for the guy. Even if Ming Fan is very fucking wrong.

“Well *I* don’t want to be in the room,” Shen Yuan defends himself, “it’s just a precaution! I promise.”

“I just don’t understand,” Ming Fan continues as if he didn’t hear. Typical. “If Shizun was going to claim you, why not earlier? I could- I wouldn’t have let it go on… if I had *known–!”*

Shen Yuan huffs and crosses his arms and uses all of his thirteen year old height to glare with disappointment.

“That shouldn’t matter! You're the head disciple, are you not? Shixiong should treat people well!” he argues.

“This one does! Normally!”

Shen Yuan stares and gives a pointed tug to his girly hat. Ming Fan flushes and looks away, hands clenching and unclenching by his side.

“It didn’t seem so bad at first,” he mumbles.

Which… is fair. Ming Fan truly hadn’t done anything too bad. Even months back, when Shen Yuan was cornered in the kitchen storage- even then, he stayed mostly out of it. He threw some insults, but he told Zhao De to not be too rough.

It was, really, mostly Zhao De doing everything that hurt.

It wasn’t like in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* where Ming Fan was in charge of enacting the ordered punishments when Shen Qingqiu didn’t feel like it. There had been no beatings. At most a few shoves, some insults.

“But Shixiong is the head disciple.”

You should have been able to stop it, goes unsaid.

“Yes.”

Ming Fan sighs. And then he does a truly shocking thing.

He bows.

Deeply.

“This shixiong apologizes to Shen-shidi,” he says, and Shen Yuan gapes at him, static in his brain from the alien sight, “this one let personal feelings affect what should have remained… that is, this one apologizes. I beg for Shidi's forgiveness.”

“Alright,” Shen Yuan says, unable to think up anything else.

Ming Fan offers a sad nod.

They stare awkwardly at each other. After a moment, Ming Fan turns and leaves, his pace brisk and the back of his neck bright red. Shen Yuan stares until the older boy is gone, still trying and utterly failing to process what he just witnessed.

“You forgave him?” Binghe hisses from behind; Shen Yuan shrieks and slaps him. They both freeze in utter shock, staring at each other.

Slowly, Luo Binghe puts a hand to his reddened cheek.

Oh fuck he slapped the protagonist!!!!!!! NOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!

Shen Yuan wants to die and fade away forever. He wants to implode and just not be here, alright??? He reaches for Binghe, realizes what he is doing, and snatches his hands back.

He holds them awkwardly to his chest.

“Ow,” Binghe finally says.

“No!” Shen Yuan wails and pulls Binghe closer to look at his cheek, “this one is so sorry, Binghe! Oh does it hurt a lot? I didn’t- you should not sneak up like that! I could’ve hurt you! Ah! I *did* hurt you!” And then he realizes Binghe is *smiling.* He frowns and pinches his (unslapped) cheek. “It’s not funny!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Luo Binghe laughs, ducking away from the pinching, grabbing Shen Yuan’s hand when it follows, “it’s not that bad! I promise!”

“You said *ow.”*

“It truly doesn’t hurt!”

“Hmpf.”

It’s difficult to be mad when the protagonist smiles like that. If Ning Yingying’s smile is like cheerful sunlight, then Binghe’s smile is like the sun itself, when it passes over the mountain peaks and paints the clouds in vibrant colors. It is softer and cozier, and quite honestly, Shen Yuan does *not* blame all those wives for falling at first glance. Look at that smile! Look at it!!!

Shen Yuan looks down at Binghe’s hand holding his and swallows.

“This one is sorry for yelling before,” he mumbles, twisting his hand so he can grasp at Binghe’s and give it a squeeze.

“I yelled first,” Luo Binghe softly points out.

“But you yelled because you were *worried,”* Shen Yuan protests, looking up at Binghe, who has grown more than him. Unfair, but expected. “I yelled because I was angry.”

“Are you still angry?”

Luo Binghe asks it knowingly. Shen Yuan frowns at him, then sighs and shakes his head. No, he’s not. He doesn’t think he could *ever* be angry at Binghe, not for real.

“I’m just… everything is so much,” he mutters, cheeks flushed with shame. “I don’t know.” And then he groans and rubs at his face, digging the palm of his hand into his eye. He’s so fucking *tired.* “And now I can’t even sleep in the woodshed!”

“Oh, good.”

“No!” Shen Yuan protests, dropping his hand to glare, “not good! I have to sleep in Shizun’s house instead!”

Luo Binghe stares.

“Why?” he asks, as bewildered as Shen Yuan is. Because yeah, the Scum villain explained *why,* but it still made no damn sense! The guy hated everything and everyone! Why not let Shen Yuan become the roomie of some other master, not *the* master???

“I don’t know!” he groans, and bonks his forehead against Binghe’s shoulder, “I don’t know *anything!”* He doesn’t twitch when Luo Binghe carefully wraps his arm around him, the hug a gentle pressure he doesn’t mind. It’s one-armed, Binghe not letting go of Shen Yuan’s hand.

“Yuan knows a lot,” Binghe tells him, and he grumbles against his friend’s shoulder, “and… and if Shen Qingqiu does anything, I will save you.”

“Shizun,” he corrects.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe echoes.

“I don’t understand why you stopped being respectful to him.”

“I don’t understand why you forgave Ming Fan.”

“Ming-shixiong!” Shen Yuan protests, leaning away to glare. This time, Luo Binghe does not echo him. He huffs instead, sending a glare in the direction Ming Fan disappeared to.

“No,” he says, and Shen Yuan sees that stubborn furrow to his brow. The protagonist will not let it go, and Shen Yuan is too fucking tired to bother. So he groans and pulls away, instead stomping off towards the baths, because moving boxes had been sweaty work. And it is the end of the day, anyway- it’s why he had tried to sneak off to the woodshed.

Ugh. Plans *ruined.*

(+5 B-points!)

For what?? For being rude to the head disciple???

He stomps all the way to the baths and then has to sit and wait awkwardly until he is sure no one else will join. Only then, carefully removing the charm that hides the brand, does he enter, and Binghe follows, eventually coaxing him into talking about the book they found the other day on the six headed blue crab.

It feels weird when it’s time for them to part.

They stare for a moment; Shen Yuan on the path towards the bamboo house, Luo Binghe on the path to the dormitories.

“Do you need a blanket?” Shen Yuan asks and tugs on his sleeves, on the hat, on the collar of his winter uniform, hands restless. His heart feels tight and odd.

“This one has already gotten a new one,” Luo Binghe assures, “does Yuan need a blanket?”

“No, I… I brought mine to the…” he trails off.

The last bell for their curfew rings.

Shen Yuan clears his throat. He stands as tall as he can, and sticks one hand out for a manly handshake.

“Sleep well, Binghe.”

Luo Binghe’s smile is helpless and a little bit wonky, as if he is forcing it just a little bit. He grabs Shen Yuan’s hand and tugs him into a hug instead, absolutely ruining the macho energy he was going for. But Shen Yuan still hugs back, maybe a little bit too tightly but it’s *fine.* Binghe won’t judge, surely.

“Sleep well, Yuan,” Binghe mumbles back.

Shen Qingqiu does not look up when Shen Yuan enters the house.

The door shuts. He locks it, even though it has no meaning in a world of cultivators. For a moment, Shen Yuan lingers there. He looks around this house he is now supposed to stay in. The walls of bamboo, the paintings hanging by the walls. There is a small display with fans carefully lined up. He counts eight before Shen Qingqiu speaks.

“Are you going to stare all night, or will you actually use the room this master gifted you?”

Shen Yuan flushes and puffs up all at once. He tries to glare at the man, but Shen Qingqiu *still* won’t look up. He only drinks his tea while reading a scroll of something-something, looking bored and unbothered.

Shen Yuan huffs. Then he takes a deep breath and slowly removes the hat, holding it close to him after. Shen Qingqiu still does not look. That’s a small relief.

“This disciple wonders what will happen if I lose control tonight?” he asks, playing with the fluffy fur. He wonders what kind it is. A real animal, or one of the many magical beasts of the world? Perhaps even a demonic one? The fur is *very* soft and very warm.

“If you break your bed, sleep on the floor. Or the rug here,” Shen Qingqiu says, eyes quickly flicking a pointed glance at the rug laid out on the floor. It is thick, and likely only laid out for

winter.

“... forever?”

“Obviously *not.”*

Ugh.

“Thank you,” he says through gritted teeth, “Shizun.”

“Mn. Go to your room.”

Shen Yuan doesn’t know why *that* feels weird to hear, but it sure does. He grimaces. He walks to the room, closing the door without saying good night. Shen Qingqiu does not offer one either.

After it had all been emptied out, the room was left… sparse.

The only thing in the room was the bed; a simple wooden thing, with his blanket haphazardly thrown over it from before. There is a wheat buck pillow that he can’t remember bringing, but at least it’s not one of those porcelain pillows. Shen Yuan doesn’t think he will *ever* get used to those.

It’s very quiet.

He lays down. At first, he tries to hide himself under the blanket the way he has done for nearly a year now. But he keeps having to tug it back down to make sure the room truly *is* as silent as it seems.

It feels empty.

Well, that makes sense. And if Shen Yuan is lucky, his stupid nightmares will stop and he won’t blow shit up and *then* he will return to the dormitories soon enough. With their… people. And constant shifting and twitching. He curls up and looks towards the small, round window of the room.

He hopes Binghe will finally get to sleep, now that he isn’t there.

Shen Yuan doesn’t remember when he falls asleep. But at some point, despite the eerie stillness of the room, he drifts off, and for a moment he doesn’t dream.

The door splinters in a flash of white; Shen Qingqiu is within the room before the pieces land on the floor, his pale night robes catching the moonlight.

He takes one look at the trembling, glowing child in the room and frowns.

Moments later, they are on their way to Qian Cao Peak.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I will miss Binghe! ;A;
LBH: I will miss Yuan, too long will we be parted! ;A;
Them: *sadly walks to the building 15 minutes away*
The Whole Peak, eating melon seeds: ah, youth.

SY: *holds out for a handshake*
LBH: oh! oh Yuan is doing that weird thing again! Where he grabs my hand and shakes it! But I have a BETTER idea. *hugs*
SY: well this is NOT very manly, I must say. <- near tears, struggling

I couldn't decide which one I found funnier. Anyway!
A lil' bit of an early update since I don't know if I'll manage it later :D
Hope you liked it!

There's fanart <3

Chapter 5: Friendodo drew the attack on LQG <3

Chapter 6:
Friendodo also drew SY having a rough time! He is so upset, poor bby. Someone hug him pls. But also he might try to force those game pieces down the throat of whoever touches him next, hm.
Lady Dysnomia drew amazing portaits of before and after haircut!SY! Oh it is LOVELY!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu does not visit Qian Cao Peak.

It is a fact which Mu Qingfang has had to tolerate since the Peak Lord first joined as a disciple, sixteen years of age and coldly disinterested in anything but distance as Yue Qingyuan had dragged him inside for his first and apparently last proper health examination. He had allowed it while doing an excellent impression of a statue, his answers to each question said with exactly as many words as needed and no more.

His robes had been filthy with drying blood.

To receive a talisman demanding Mu Qingfang's attention is not so much out of the norm as to just not ever happen. To receive it due to the difficulties of a disciple is even less so; if such a thing happens, it is a lower master who has taken notice. Never Shen Qingqiu himself.

Qi deviation is a dangerous thing.

When Shen Qingqiu arrives at Qian Cao Peak, it is only the years of experience that keeps Mu Qingfang calm as he takes in the sight.

The Lord of Qing Jing Peak has never looked less composed, nor more furious. The child in his arms is a lanky little thing, bursting with an inner light even as he snarls and hisses like a feral feline; they arrived by sword, and Mu Qingfang is deeply impressed that Shen Qingqiu did not intentionally drop the child on the way.

It is clear that the child is wild not only due to qi deviation, but something more. Heart demons are tricky things to treat, and with how similar the boy looks to Shen Qingqiu, one can only assume it is inherited.

From the child's half-rambling words of defiance, he thinks there is medical trauma involved. He catches a glimpse of red on the boy's neck; it might be something else. It is a shame, but qi deviations do not wait for such things to settle.

"Here," Mu Qingfang says and reaches for the child, neatly avoiding a kick aimed at his face, "let this shidi take care of him."

Shen Qingqiu nearly throws the child at him in response; Mu Qingfang is quick to adjust his grip so that the child can not claw, bite nor kick at him. The boy's eyes are a vibrant green that only becomes more so as the light from within grows stronger. Mu Qingfang carries the boy towards the room he set up.

“Let me go!” the boy screams. There are angry tears running down his cheeks, his chest heaving with the need for air. His voice is strained with panic.

The burst of qi is expected; it shakes the walls and shreds a painting of medical herbs into dust, but a simple swirl of Mu Qingfang’s own qi ensures neither he nor Shen Qingqiu are affected.

It is, however, a near thing and nearly makes him stumble.

“It is alright,” Mu Qingfang soothes, and he cannot let go of the child like this. Shen Qingqiu closes the door behind them, perhaps sensing as much. Deciding that he need not worry, Mu Qingfang focuses on the child.

He holds the boy close as he pours his energy into him. The meridians are like small explosions within, near to erupting. They flicker like flames of a wildfire, the paths scorched from overuse. The child is too young to have such bursts of energy. He has yet to cultivate a golden core.

If he had not received the training he already has, Shen Yuan would have died in a burst of blood and energy. With the unstable qi he has accumulated, Mu Qingfang suspects the boy could take out a neighborhood in such an event. At the very least the building they are currently in.

Of course, he will not let such a thing happen.

He sits and holds the child that continues to strain against him, and he does not pay any heed to the outside world as he pours himself into soothing what has been burnt, to heal what has been broken. The pathways are gnarled and tricky, but Mu Qingfang has experience. They are not as twisted as Shen Qingqiu’s, nor as ethereal as Yue Qingyuan’s, whose meridians are difficult to grasp at since his bonding.

By the time Mu Qingfang’s vision clears, the child is slumped against him. Shen Yuan trembles in his arms, but his growing core has been soothed. His meridians are back to their natural state, the pathways between vital points straightened out into something resembling an order.

Mu Qingfang takes stock of himself; once he knows he still has a healthy amount of qi circulating, he relaxes.

“Shixiong,” he says, “you did not need to remain.”

Shen Qingqiu glares from behind his fan.

The Qing Jing Peak Lord sits by the window. Outside, the sun is rising golden and bright between the peaks. Many hours have been spent soothing Shen Yuan away from death. Hours which Shen Qingqiu surely knew that he could leave. Hours of work he has not done, summons he must have ignored. No one knows where either of them are, the emergency too swift to send more messages. And yet, dutiful Shen Qingqiu remains.

Perhaps Yue Qingyuan's musings have some truths in them.

Mu Qingfang offers a smile at the other man before he helps the boy lay down on his side. Shen Yuan's eyes are hazy and struggling to remain open. Perhaps the trembling is not purely from exhaustion.

"Put the blanket over his head."

Mu Qingfang hums and does as told, careful to not touch the choppy hair there. He has heard enough to know what happened; and it seems Shen Qingqiu's order had merit. The boy instantly goes limp the moment his head is covered, the sole hand outside the blanket going limp. Soon, soft breaths of sleep can be heard.

"He has a strong core, for being so young. Great potential."

"The destructive kind." Shen Qingqiu says. His tone is harsh.

"The child is scared. Only the show of safety and comfort will make it end," Mu Qingfang replies. He sits down and sends a talisman to his head disciple, informing her of where he is in case of emergencies.

For now, he is tired.

"... he should not have been scared tonight."

"One can't speculate on such things, shixiong," he soothes, and Shen Qingqiu bristles like an angry cat. Mu Qingfang does not smile, despite feeling fond amusement.

The man is a prickly sort, distant and isolated. Mu Qingfang have the rare honor of speaking to him more than the rest of their sect siblings. Shen Qingqiu's words are always as sharp as his blade, always aiming to injure in any manner he is capable of. There is always the edge of qi deviation around him, though it has ironically calmed since he became a Peak Lord. Most grow worse. Perhaps the feeling of control helps him.

Mu Qingfang only made the mistake of asking once.
Still, he has grown fond of his young shixiong despite his harsh personality.

"However, is there a reason why shixiong thinks he should not have been scared tonight?" he asks.

Shen Qingqiu glances towards the boy, or the lump sleeping under the blanket. The hand peeking out is relaxed, fingers curling inwards ever so gently. Shen Qingqiu lowers his fan and sends a glare towards Mu Qingfang. He does not mind.

"The child has a history of destroying furniture when feeling… *stressed,"* he says in a slow and measured tone, and yet it feels as if he would like to bite down on the words passing his lips. Mu Qingfang nods to encourage more. "So this one moved him into the bamboo house."

Oh. Mu Qingfang raises a brow, his one good eye looking towards Shen Yuan. He thinks about how excited Yue Qingyuan had been when the boy first arrived at the peak, and he looks towards Shen Qingqiu who seems to dare him to say something, anything.

He considers his words.

“This shidi would like to know how often this has happened.”

The fan goes back up; the narrowed glare of Shen Qingqiu barely peeking past it as he simply watches Mu Qingfang for a long moment.

It is a good thing that Qian Cao peak teaches patience.

“... this is the third time,” Shen Qingqiu says. One may as well squeeze a stone for blood, Mu Qingfang thinks and nods instead of smiling.

“Are you aware of anything which connects the events?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone who would know?”

Shen Qingqiu scoffs, which may as well be a Yes. Mu Qingfang waits, and as the silence stretches on, he makes a list of what he needs to do for Shen Yuan. There is medicine and tea, orders on how to use his still forming core to avoid exhaustion. Things so common that he only goes over it to keep himself occupied.

“He has a *friend,”* Shen Qingqiu spits, “who *might* know.”

“Then perhaps I shall inquire with this friend,” Mu Qingfang replies and rolls his shoulders, stiff and aching from holding the boy through the night, “to ensure that Shen Yuan receives proper treatment.”

“I did not tell you his name.”

“Shixiong,” Mu Qingfang says, “the whole sect knows of him.”

Cultivators like to gossip.
The Lord of Qing Jing Peak has always been a popular subject.

Shen Qingqiu’s lips are a pale line of displeasure when he stands up. The movement is quick, snapping and angry, the fan closing with a click that may as well have been the slash of a sword. Mu Qingfang rises and follows him to the door.

“He’s *not* my son,” Shen Qingqiu snaps before the door, hand resting against it.

“But he must be something,” Mu Qingfang replies and does not blink at the glare he receives.

“Shixiong. I am only *half* blind, and I am not deaf. There is no shame in caring for kin.” He does not look towards the sleeping child as he continues, “and not one so troubled. I am certain he will appreciate your support.”

Shen Qingqiu scoffs and opens the door.

“Oh, I doubt *that.* He hates me. As he should,” he says and leaves, the door slamming shut with a flick of his hand.

Mu Qingfang sighs.

Shen Yuan opens his eyes to a gauzy canopy.

It’s white and hangs above him like tattered clouds. He blearily stares for a long moment, head pounding and mouth dry. He wrinkles his nose. There’s perfume pouches hanging in each corner, with little sigils sewed into them.

He lays there for what might be forever.

And then the door opens, and Shen Yuan’s brain abruptly comes online as he realizes this is *wrong,* this *place* is wrong. He tries to sit up and instead does a sad version of a worm, flopping and wriggling, blankets tangling around his limbs.

“Shizhi, it is alright. Let this Shishu help you.”

There is a quick tug and Shen Yuan squawks as he is abruptly freed, the blanket briefly letting in cold air. Up until just then, he did not realize how warm he had been underneath it. Shen Yuan tucks his legs back in under the blanket to protect them from possible chills, shivering. The man chuckles as he puts down a tray by the bed.

Shen Yuan curls up, quickly abandoning the idea of sitting up because *wow* that was embarrassing. Instead he angles himself so he can watch the new arrival.

The man smiles at him.

He has the kind of slate brown hair that is nearly black, tied out of the way with the help of braids and topped by a crown suited for a Peak Lord. Far simpler in design than anything he has seen before; more practical as well. Even Liu Qingge’s crown had been expensive looking in comparison.

This crown almost looks like an afterthought due to its modesty.

It must be Mu Qingfang; that much is easy to figure out. His left eye is a pale amber brown, nearly golden, and his right one has turned a cloudy white at some point. Shen Yuan stares rudely, but he can't see any scars on the man's face.

"Does Shen-shizhi need help to sit up?"

"... maybe," he slowly says, only to wince. His voice sounds worse than a sick frog trying to croak past a cough. But Mu Qingfang merely smiles and reaches to help him sit up.

Shen Yuan feels like an overcooked noodle. Or maybe like that one time he threw a pizza into the oven and it turned all black, crumbling into charcoal at the lightest touch. Fragile and unpleasant and *gross.* The pillows that Mu Qingfang positions around him manages to keep Shen Yuan sitting, but at what cost? His pride?? He got so little of it already!

"Water," the man says, and Shen Yuan is so damn grateful he can at least hold the cup by himself. It's a soothing balm to his throat.

He doesn't look away from Mu Qingfang the entire time.

"This one is Mu Qingfang," the man says. Fuck yeah, score, he was right! "Do you know why you are here?"

Shen Yuan sips his drink and thinks.

He fell asleep in a too quiet room. There had been dreams, as was normal now. He had woken up. Shen Yuan remembers sitting in bed for a while, no blasting to be seen, but he is still somehow here, on what must be Qian Cao Peak, because Mu Qingfang is here.

Shen Yuan flushes as he remembers being afraid. Just- afraid. It feels embarrassing *now,* but back then it had felt like the world was tearing itself asunder. Because the room had been empty and still, bare of all things except him. And Binghe hadn't been there; he thinks maybe that was what made the rest go hazy and blank and awful. Binghe hadn't been there, and if Binghe wasn't there, was Shen Yuan still *there?*

Yeah, after that, things just… stopped.

He reaches up, hand trembling, and touches his messy hair. It's short. Shen Yuan breathes out and having finished his water, he puts the cup down a little too heavily. It clunks loudly against the wooden tray.

"I'm not sure," Shen Yuan finally answers.

He can *guess* why he's here. But he doesn't *know.*

"You experienced an qi deviation," Mu Qingfang explains. His voice isn't gentle so much as matter of fact. This thing happened, it says, and that is alright. This is what we do now.

Shen Yuan kinda likes that. It doesn't feel like pity, it just feels like they are going to work on this stupid problem together.

"It disturbed your meridians, but you should not be in any danger now. However, there is a list we need to go through that will help your recovery. Do you need to lie down, or can we speak of it now?"

Ugh, there's probably medicine to eat. Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose and pats at his head, and it would be dumb to ask for the stupid fur hat. It's not even here and also, the room is actually warm now that he has gotten used to not being covered by a blanket. He eyes the door. He looks back at Mu Qingfang who simply sits there, patient and calm.

He does look kinda cool. That blind eye makes him look badass.

"I can sit up," he says and Mu Qingfang nods and smiles and proceeds to detail everything boring in the world. The eye was clearly Airplane's attempt to make a doctor cool enough you couldn't *fully* ignore him, even if he barely showed up in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.*

Medicines and routines, a detail about just how fucked up his meridians got and exercises to make sure it doesn't happen as often. A few poking questions about *why* it happened that Shen Yuan doesn't answer because they're stupid and embarrassing and he *will* solve it.

He can't say he panicked because he was alone.

Shen Yuan is *thirteen.*

What thirteen year old can't be alone? No, he's just going to keep that to himself. Besides, it might have been a fluke, an anomaly! Now when he knew he was going to sleep in the bamboo house, he just needed to get used to it. For sure.

Oh shit.

"Did I break my bed?" he blurts out.

"Hm, I would not know," Mu Qingfang answers, "your Shizun didn't tell me of any such thing."

Shen Yuan vaguely remembers trying to bite the Scum villain. His face is on fire from humiliation and Shen Yuan groans and flops back down. Thanks to all the pillows, it's more like a bumpy slide until he is face down against the bed. Mu Qingfang doesn't laugh, but Shen Yuan is sure that he wants to.

(+5 F-points! Congratulations, Peak Lord Mu Qingfang of Qian Cao Peak Has Been Acquired!)

What?

Wait, what? Like a gacha game?

And if so, why didn't he get that notification for Shen Qingqiu? For Yue Qingyuan? He has received F-points from *both* of those!

(User Shen Yuan had them unlocked before F-points were available.) the system says and then it flashes away.

He pokes at it a few times, but it only sends him a winky face each time until he gives up. Shen Yuan sighs miserably. After a while, Mu Qingfang helps him sit back up again.

Qian Cao Peak is a very busy place.

Shen Yuan is not used to it. Qing Jing Peak is not *calm,* per say, but the busy energy of it is not of the same intensity as the peak of medicine. People are not on a mission to save lives, handle rowdy cultivators or crying children. On Qing Jing Peak, those who walk briskly are more likely to have a book they wish to read or a poem they must write *now.*

It is a relief to be sent back before the day is over.

A little more embarrassing to have Mu Qingfang himself taking the time to fly him back. With Shen Yuan's legs still feeling unsteady, he knows he should be grateful that he doesn't have to walk on the rainbow bridge all the way back.

But it feels a bit too much like special privilege to be anything but embarrassing. Shen Yuan's face is red when they land, and not only because of the cold winter air.

"Now, remember," the man says as he helps Shen Yuan step down from Zhu Lei, the sword's name not fitting Mu Qingfang at *all* but who is he to judge? "If there is a flare of your qi, you must seek out Shen Qingqiu. This one has already informed him of how to properly replenish your qi if such a thing occurs."

Shen Yuan nods along, very much not planning to do that.
It's fine! He will be fine!!!

As if sensing this, Mu Qingfang raises one brow at him.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to respond, tugging at the hood of his uniform, clouds shaped by his breath in the cold winter air.

"Yuan!" Binghe shouts and before Shen Yuan has spoken a single word or taken even one step away from Mu Qingfang, there are arms around him. He instantly hugs back, embarrassingly clingy, but it's fine. There's totally not a lot of people passing by as they cling

to each other like two big babies, and Shen Yuan is happy to take the excuse to not answer properly.

“Binghe,” he says and Binghe hugs him tighter.

“A-Yuan!” Ning Yingying then calls, and they both squawk and nearly fall as she tries to hug too, a quick shuffle to ensure none of them loses their foothold on the slippery path of snow and ice. Eventually giving up- not that Binghe helps, he is pretty sure he saw the other boy elbow her in the gut by accident- Ning Yingying whips out a familiar fluffy hat. “Here’s my hat!”

“Oh, thank you, shijie,” he replies and accepts it. He doesn’t dare to put it on now, there are too many people around and he needs to put on a new talisman for his neck just to be sure. But it’s still nice to receive, and so he smiles at her. “You didn’t have to… I thought I left it in the house?”

“A-Yuan would be cold! And Shizun said I should give it to you if I’m going to say hi anyway, so it just made sense!”

Huh?

“What-”

“It is a relief to see that Shen-shizhi has such good friends,” Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan leans back a bit so that Luo Binghe can turn his head to look at the man. He also tries to stop hugging the other boy, to let him pay proper respect.

Luo Binghe doesn’t let go.

“A-Yuan is the *best,* and he’s so little, he needs us,” Ning Yingying informs the peak lord and Shen Yuan wants to die, actually. Don’t talk about him like he is a *baby!!!!* Luo Binghe huffs a laugh against him and Shen Yuan dares to reach up to pinch his ear for it, but it only makes Binghe laugh again, muffled against Shen Yuan’s shoulder.

He *hmpfs*.

“I’m not little,” he says, even though he is currently the shortest disciple on the entire peak. Even Ning Yingying has grown past him. Whatever, girls always get their growth spurt first. After some prodding, Luo Binghe finally lets go and Shen Yuan offers a bow to Mu Qingfang.

“This one is grateful for Shishu’s help,” he says, and pokes at Binghe with his foot to make the boy bow as well.

Luo Binghe does so.

Ning Yingying offers one the way she does everything; a quick bounce up and down before she grabs hold of Mu Qingfang’s sleeves.

“Did you give A-Yuan lots of medicines? Do they taste awful? Why was A-Yuan with you? A-Luo and I looked for him *everywhere* today and now it’s past the midday meal and does A-Yuan need to eat? Are you hungry, A-Yuan?” she asks, twisting to look at him without letting go of the Peak Lord.

Mu Qingfang looks used to it. Shen Yuan wonders how often people meet Ning Yingying. She’s not that much older than him and Binghe, but maybe she is allowed to go more places. Or maybe Shen Qingqiu just brings her everywhere. He tries to picture Ning Yingying at a Peak Lord meeting and *can’t.*

“No one told you?” Shen Yuan asks instead, looking at Binghe. The protagonist stands close enough that their elbows bump with every breath.

Luo Binghe shakes his head.

Now when Shen Yuan is truly looking at him, worry grows in his heart. The other boy looks neat and orderly, his fluffy hair tied out of the way and his posture straight. But he also looks pale, and like someone decided to paint the bags under his eyes a deep purple.

It looks like he slept even less than Shen Yuan.

Which makes no sense, of course. The absence of him should have allowed Luo Binghe to catch a night of good sleep, not the opposite. He frowns at the boy.

It does make sense that Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t bother telling anyone what happened. Perhaps it is another thing to ensure they outmaneuver the Zhao family, to ensure that Shen Yuan’s little mishap does not come to light. Perhaps the man simply didn’t care.

But with how Luo Binghe looks him over, Shen Yuan doesn’t think he needs to explain what happened. Binghe is smart.

“Well, this one ate,” he says, a belated answer to Ning Yingying’s questions, “and, um. That is… I’m fine now?”

“Are you sure? It’s not because Zhao De’s family arrived early?” she asks, and Shen Yuan freezes. The hand holding the hat clenches, and he stares blankly at her.

“What?”

“Shizun said they can wait their damn time and that it’s not his fault they arrived one day early,” Ning Yingying continues, oblivious to how Shen Yuan’s chest feels cold and numb, “so you won’t have to say hi to them, but-”

A hand settles against his back; Shen Yuan jumps at first, but then the warm qi of Mu Qingfang flows into him and he realizes his hands had been sparking again, that the cold ice in his chest had been threatened by an itching heat.

Embarrassed, he bites his lip and stares at his feet.

“Don’t talk about *him* now,” Luo Binghe snaps, and he really should be nicer to his future wife. But Shen Yuan can’t make himself say a single word as Binghe continues, “Yuan has been sick, he needs to be calm. And in bed. Yuan, do you need help going to bed?” he asks, voice going from snapping to concerned in a blink.

“It is alright,” Mu Qingfang soothes, the ice thawed and the fire calmed as he removes his hand. Shen Yuan clings to the hat like it’s a teddy bear, his breathing shaky but everything else easier. “Shen-shizhi does need rest, however. Perhaps Ning-shizhi should attend to her duties.”

Ning Yingying deflates; but she nods, pouting and not quite guilty but perhaps, just for once, seems aware she said too much.

“I can help A-Yuan to bed…” she grumbles.

“This one will do so,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan doesn’t mind when his friend carefully takes the hat from him and gently puts it over his head, somehow managing to do so without pulling the hood fully down, “do you want to go back to the bamboo house?” he then asks in a whisper, so low even Shen Yuan strains to hear it.

He wrinkles his nose.

But he still nods, and Luo Binghe nods with him and takes his hand as they begin to lead the way, Ning Yingying reluctantly going the other direction. As if Mu Qingfang doesn’t know where it is- though he wonders why the man is still there. If he had wished to speak with Shen Qingqiu, could they not have landed by the house itself rather than a walk away? There are so many stairs.

But more importantly–

“Where are they staying?” Shen Yuan asks, and he doesn’t have to specify *who.* Luo Binghe frowns like a stormcloud, eyes narrowed into knives and it’s not very scary on his twelve-year old face. It is comforting, though, in a really bizarre way.

“Down in the village,” Luo Binghe says, “we heard them try and tell She-” with a pointed glare from Shen Yuan, Binghe seems to remember the presence of the other peak lord behind them, and corrects himself through gritted teeth, *“Shizun* that they wished to stay in the guest abodes here, but he said no. As Ning-shijie told Yuan.”

“Did he really swear at them?”

It doesn’t sound impossible. Shen Qingqiu *is* the Scum villain. But Luo Binghe shakes his head, offering a small, apologetic smile.

“He didn’t.”

Damn. That *could* have been funny. Well, that still meant he swore at some point and Ning Yingying had overheard it. She didn't tend to throw in random swears if Shen Qingqiu hadn't *actually* said them.

Shen Yuan must look disappointed; his friend huffs a laugh. Even that sounds tired, though, and he tries his best to not frown at Binghe with concern. Mu Qingfang is still following.

The door to the bamboo house doesn't creak when they step inside. He doesn't think Luo Binghe is actually allowed into the house, nor does he think Mu Qingfang is welcome either. But they trudge with him when there is noone to stop them and Shen Yuan remembers he really does need to make sure he has a fucking bed.

He does; his blanket is missing, as is the *door,* but the bed itself remains. There is only one thin crack going through it that only seems to be on the surface.

Shen Yuan traces it for a moment.

"I didn't break this one at least," he half-jokes.

"It is quite impressive," Mu Qingfan says as he inspects the doorway, "that you were capable of breaking the door from such a distance." Knowing eyes turn to him. "Are you certain you are unaware of the cause?"

Shen Yuan does his very best poker face. The way both Mu Qingfang and Luo Binghe look at him, he's pretty sure he fails. Unfair; his best friend and a *Peak Lord doctor.* If it was literally anyone else, Shen Yuan is sure he would have fooled them!

"Yuan…?" Luo Binghe coaxes. He tugs lightly at Shen Yuan's fingers, a barely there touch. His eyes are worried.

"I'm just- this one was just… unused to the room! That is all," he defends himself, using one hand to tug at the hat, the hood having fallen down as they entered the house. The other hand, he uses to grab Binghe's. "And maybe this one overreacted about it. Truly, I'm sure it won't repeat again."

"Shizhi, you nearly qi deviated mere moments ago at the mention of a certain family," Mu Qingfang points out. He is still not gentle. He still speaks it as a fact. Except this time, Shen Yuan would very much prefer a book with sources he can cite in defense. As it is, he feels his face heat with humiliation. "What your core needs is peace. This one is certain that your friend wants the same."

Oh, low blow.

Already using *Binghe* against him. Is it that obvious that Binghe is his favorite character? His best friend? Shit, of course it is, they're holding hands and being babies about it but- but it's still *very* rude.
Shen Yuan frowns at Mu Qingfang. But Luo Binghe nods, eyes still filled with worry but his face firm with determination as he looks at Shen Yuan.

“Can I help?” the protagonist asks.

Yes, Shen Yuan almost says, *I never have nightmares with you.*

The mere idea of saying that only makes his face burn brighter. It’s a giveaway for sure. There is a glint to Binghe’s eyes that reminds him of *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* If Luo Binghe spots a weakness, he will pounce on it. Shen Yuan kind of expected that for enemies.

Not for *him.*

But it’s clear that Luo Binghe has decided to do his very best, and that’s admirable! Very clever! Just- turn that away from *Shen Yuan???*

“Please, Yuan,” his best friend softly says, a tremble to his voice and Shen Yuan is pretty sure it’s fake. He’s almost sure. He wants to puff himself up and glare and tell Luo Binghe off for it.

But what if it’s *not* fake?

“I only want to help,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan remembers the bruises they both got from the bullying. The way he could have killed Luo Binghe because of a silly nightmare, and how quickly Binghe forgave him. Luo Binghe sounds so earnest, the way he did when they first met and he taught Shen Yuan how to light a fire.

He thinks about how he really *does* sleep better sharing the same bed.

Maybe it’s the secret power of the protagonist.

His face doesn’t stop burning, but Shen Yuan feels his resolve weaken. Finally, he sighs, and is only a little mad when he sees the triumphant glint in Binghe’s eyes because of it. He frowns at Luo Binghe who blinks innocently (fake!!!) and then Shen Yuan very slowly turns to look at Mu Qingfang. The man has clearly watched the whole thing. He looks too amused for his own good.

Shen Yuan frowns deeper at him.

“Nightmares,” he spits out, squeezing at Binghe’s hand because he doesn’t want to let go but also he *hates this, ugh!* “I have nightmares. And- and- and I don’t… I’m… this one…” He is going to die. His entire face is on fire. He kind of wants Shen Qingqiu to show up, because surely the man would chase everyone out and then order Shen Yuan to the room? *Surely* he would be the plot twist, the anti-hero to Shen Yuan’s plight???

Of course the bastard doesn’t show up. *Bitch.*

“Binghe helps,” he hisses out, and when Luo Binghe *lights up* in response, Shen Yuan makes the sound of a dying whale and yanks his hand back. Just so he can tug the hat down until it covers his eyes, blinding himself with the soft fur.

“I see,” Mu Qingfang says, “is shizhi saying that sharing a room with Luo Binghe would help?”

Shen Yuan makes a sound and a shrug and immediately regrets it.

“It won’t?” Luo Binghe asks, and he doesn’t have to see the other boy’s face to *know* he looks sad. He makes another dying whale sound in protest.

“I am not allowing *sleepovers* in my home,” Shen Qingqiu says like the too late bastard he is. Shen Yuan pushes the hat up just enough that he can see the man.

Shen Qingqiu stands by the doorway.

He looks deeply unimpressed. The fan of the day rests against his palm, the way one would hold a hammer. As if he is considering whose head to whack it with. His cold eyes flick over them all before they settle on Shen Yuan. They stare at each other for a moment. Mu Qingfang and Luo Binghe are quiet; but he can see through the corner of his eye how the protagonist inches closer to him, a soft shuffle of feet.

Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

“Shidi,” he says, “does Qian Cao Peak not practice manners?”

“This one apologizes,” Mu Qingfang says, “Shen-shizhi had a qi flare before, so this one only wished to see him back safely.”

Damn snitch.

Shen Qingqiu looks at Shen Yuan; his eyes picking at him until Shen Yuan figures he may as well just lay down on a dissection table and hand the scalpel over himself. Whatever Shen Qingqiu finds, he doesn’t seem impressed by it.

“Go to your room,” is the cold response.

Shen Yuan looks around himself; then back at Shen Qingqiu. The man narrows his eyes in warning but despite that, Shen Yuan dares to raise a brow in defiance. He is *already* in the room. It’s not his fault there’s no door.

… well, alright, it *is* his fault. Whatever.

“If the boy is still sick, why is he here?” Shen Qingqiu asks and does not look away from Shen Yuan. He realizes the man has yet to blink; a strange urge takes over him and Shen Yuan decides he’s not going to blink either.

“I believe he will rest easier here than at Qian Cao Peak,” Mu Qingfang replies. Shen Yuan’s eyes itch but he refuses to break. “And while I understand that you would not want to have your house crowded, shixiong, perhaps the presence of Shen-shizhi’s friend would soothe his

troubles. Especially considering the news of your early arrivals."

"No," Shen Qingqiu says and Shen Yuan's eyes burn.

There is a flick of Shen Qingqiu's wrist, the fan unfolding with it. A puff of air hits Shen Yuan in the face and he blinks before he realizes it. For a moment, he blinks at the man before him, Mu Qingfang and Luo Binghe fading into the background. And then Shen Yuan chokes on a gasp as he realizes what just happened. Shen Qingqiu looks smug from behind his fan as Shen Yuan gapes at him.

That fucker *cheated.*

"It is time for you all to leave," Shen Qingqiu says and Shen Yuan is too outraged to protest as Mu Qingfang (respectfully) and Luo Binghe (reluctantly) does so.

The front door closes behind them.

Shen Qingqiu snaps his fan shut once more and turns around.

"Prepare tea," he orders, and Shen Yuan glowers at his back.

(+5 F-points!)

Fuck!!! OFF!!!

Everything is dark blue.

It is such an odd thing, he thinks as he lays in the dark, staring at the door which had been put in before curfew ended. It is an odd thing, that if one just *waits,* one can see in the dark.

And the dark is blue.

The corners of the empty room fades into little voids. The door glints the way wood can, silver moonlight catching against it in the shape of diamonds. Shen Yuan counts every glint as he curls up on the bed that's not his yet, but might be if he never manages to leave. His eyes burn. His eyelids are heavy. He keeps shifting and he keeps having to adjust his blanket as he curls up tighter, as he flops and looks towards the dark corners and the glinting door and the round window.

Shen Yuan can't fall asleep.

He stares at the window and the pale moon outside. It looks jagged and strange as the peaks seem to pierce it, uneven teeth chomping at it.

There is a rustle.

Shen Yuan freezes.

“Hello?” a familiar voice whispers, and Shen Yuan blinks and sits up. He pushes away the blanket and winces as his bare feet meet the cold floor. He walks on tip-toes to avoid the worst of it, until he is by the window. He peers through it, and doesn’t know if he should be angry or happy seeing Luo Binghe smiling nervously at him.

Shen Yuan spares the door a wary glance, but he still pushes the window open. The air outside is cold. Clouds drift from Luo Binghe’s lips as he breathes and Shen Yuan sees how the other boy holds a wheat husk pillow in his arms.

“Binghe?” he whispers.

“You said I could help,” Binghe whispers back, and then he is *climbing in,* just like that, and Shen Yuan *really* hopes the Scum villain doesn’t hear anything. To Luo Binghe’s credit, the boy is very good at quietly sneaking in. Shen Yuan closes the window with a click.

“You will get in trouble,” he says even as he leads them back to bed. Even as Luo Binghe only offers a hum of understanding, shedding his outer layers and his shoes by the bed, carefully folding it all, a ribbon tugged loose to let his hair hang free. Shen Yuan holds up the blanket and Luo Binghe is quick to slide in, their pillows pressed together as they shuffle close together.

“I’ll wake up early,” Binghe promises, his eyes sparkling in the dark, and Shen Yuan hisses as cold feet meet his. Binghe’s smile is a curve of shadows, mischievous and sweet, and Shen Yuan mutters a swear he learned on the street at him as reward. Binghe’s laugh is a huff of warm air against his cheek.

“You’re too daring for your own good,” Shen Yuan mumbles.

His eyelids feel heavy. He lets them fall and hugs close, their one blanket barely covering them both. He tucks his feet away from Binghe’s and sighs.

“Only for Yuan,” Binghe whispers back.

“Mn. G’night.”

“Good night.”

They both sleep through the night.

Chapter End Notes

MQF's design was inspired by Corysius amazing art! He looked too badass, I couldn't resist.

Due to the concerns of a few people, I thought I should adress the "Yuan" thing. As many of you may be aware of, it is actually very rude of LBH to call SY just "Yuan" without anything added to it. However, I promise I am doing this for a reason. It might not be a very good reason, but it will eventually be revealed! There's also been a little bit of hinting for it. But this is why others adress SY with honorifics and yet only LBH avoids so.
Other mistakes is just me writing for this kind of cultural setting for the first time, and I apologize for that. I try to catch what I can with what resources I have, but if I miss any I will be honest- I'll leave them there.
Mostly because I'm chronically ill, often bedridden if I'm not good enough to go to work, and I can't really muster the energy to go back and find the mistakes to correct them. I'm sorry, but I hope you guys understand <3
(and as for LQG calling SQQ just "shen" in chapter 5, that one I took from canon. Volume 1, chapter 2, page 94)

There's fanart! Woo :D

Chapter 5: Friendodo drew the attack on LQG and it is great!

Chapter 6:
Friendodo also drew SY having a rough time! He is so upset, poor bby. Someone hug him pls. But also he might try to force those game pieces down the throat of whoever touches him next, hm.
Lady Dysnomia drew amazing portaits of before and after haircut!SY! Oh it is LOVELY!

Chapter 8: Dolly drew adorable art of SY and LBH sharing a bed and, of course, a very sparkly SQQ.
And more adorable art by Lady Dysnomi AHHH

Thank you guys!!!! (sorry for the long ramble lmao)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he was younger, Yue Qingyuan had found it quite fascinating how even the colors of the sky seemed to change with the seasons, never remaining the same. The blue of summer was bright and startling, festive in its appearance, the whiteness of fluffy clouds a merry thing to watch. The very rare kind of entertainment that even street children could have.

The blue of winter is different.

It is soft, like pale silk. Colour only linger at the edges and clouds are rare to see. When snow falls, the entire sky becomes gray. But today, it is not gray. It is that soft blue, the sun a hazy vision rising towards the sky. It is almost midday.

Yue Qingyuan stands on the white stairs of Qiong Ding Peak.

His hand rests on the pommel of Xuan Su. It steadies, a connection that grounds him as much as it chains him. He watches as a dot of green gracefully flies through the sky, like a stray leaf winding its way towards him and growing ever closer. He pays less attention to the people far below, who have only just stepped a foot on Qiong Ding Peak.

He needs to remain calm.

If he stares too long at their *guests,* he will be no such thing.

It is instead a quiet joy to watch Xiao-Jiu come to a stop near him. His green robes are bright against the softness of winter, his blank and disapproving expression harsh yet a welcoming sight. The boy awkwardly stepping off of Xiu Ya is also a spot of bright joy to Yue Qingyuan's heart, his fluffy white hat hiding the state of his hair. The bruises that used to crowd his face have thankfully healed.

Of course, the reason for why they have arrived is not a good one. But Yue Qingyuan still steps forward and offers them both a smile.

"Shidi," he greets Shen Qingqiu, who barely spares him a glare which appears to be sharper than normal, "Shizhi," he instead turns to Shen Yuan. The boy smiles back, small and anxious.

"Shibo," Shen Yuan replies and bows.

"This one heard Xiao-Yuan had to visit Qian Cao Peak. Is all well?"

"It is now," Shen Yuan says, cheeks turning pink with embarrassment as he tugs at his own sleeves, "this one does not want to cause more trouble."

Before Yue Qingyuan can assure the child there is no need for such worries, Shen Qingqiu huffs.

“Do they travel like slugs?” Shen Qingqiu snaps, the question biting. His green glare is pointed at the small group making its slow way up the many stairs of Qiong Ding Peak. The lord and lady of Zhao, their son and the small entourage they were permitted to bring. “Have they not come further?”

“Their request for transport was denied,” Yue Qingyuan explains. He steps up to stand next to Xiao-Jiu. The other man sends him a glare in return, but does not move. Yue Qingyuan struggles to not let his smile widen as he continues, “so they have traveled by foot.”

“They couldn’t ride a *carriage?”*

“The request was denied,” Yue Qingyuan repeats. When Shen Qingqiu keeps looking at him with those narrowed eyes, he merely smiles back. There’s a sharpness to it for once. He can feel it himself, a jagged edge that he doesn’t know how to speak around. It’s not a sensation he is used to. It’s not bad. He doesn’t mind it.

But the edge melts away when Shen Qingqiu’s eyes don't immediately leave him. He stares back, waiting. For what, he is unsure. But Shen Qingqiu only continues to stare, his fan not yet unfolded from where he holds it in his hands. He looks tired. Not visibly so, not in such a way an outsider might know. But Qi-Ge remembers the streets, and he watches and wonders until–

Xiao-Jiu scoffs and snaps his gaze away from him.

Yue Qingyuan looks towards Shen Yuan instead.

The boy is nervous. That much is obvious. He has moved to stand to the other side of Yue Qingyuan and a step behind, still fidgeting with his robes, tugging on the hat. As Yue Qingyuan watches, Shen Yuan only looks towards their guests once.

He looks deathly pale when he does.

His eyes flick around like a hunted bird. They don’t settle for long on anything, too wide to be anything close to calm.

There are a few things which Yue Qingyuan knows now.

Some of it has been told to him through Mu Qingfang. There have been very few tidbits of information which Xiao-Jiu spat at him when asked. There have been letters from the Zhaos, demanding an explanation and refusing to listen to reason, clues dropped like crumbs between letters.

Yue Qingyuan does not stare at Shen Yuan’s nape. It is covered anyway, by the high neck of his uniform. He keeps his gaze on Shen Yuan’s face, waiting until the boy’s eyes land on him

again.

“How are your studies going?” he asks.

The boy straightens up, eyes gleaming. Shen Yuan leans over slightly to take a peek at Xiao-Jiu, but as the man refuses to look at either of them, the boy instead focuses back on Yue Qingyuan.

He doesn’t seem as scared of Shen Qingqiu as before. He also steps closer, not touching but not scared, not nervous about Yue Qingyuan’s presence. Ever since Shen Yuan told Yue Qingyuan in detail about how he bit Zhao De, the boy has seemed more at ease around him.

It warms his heart.

“They’re going well, Shibo,” Shen Yuan says, “and this disciple discovered this morning that there are many books in- in Shizun’s house concerning demonic beasts.”

Ah, yes.

“I know of the ones you speak of,” Yue Qingyuan nods, “there are books which one must memorize to become the Lord of Qing Jing Peak.”

“Yes! One of them is not actually about demonic beasts, but instead about rare cases of animals that were infused with qi, turning them into *heavenly* beasts!”

Shen Yuan is still pale and he still does not look towards the Zhaos.

But his eyes are brighter, and there’s an eager smile on his lips. He tugs on that fluffy hat of his as if to keep his gesturing down to a minimum. It is endearing, and he absently wonders if Ming Fan’s position is threatened by someone so small yet so hungry for knowledge.

He smiles encouragingly and listens as Shen Yuan rambles. His words go everywhere, sentences cut off to start on a new topic. He seems to nearly forget why they have gathered today, inching closer until he stands so close his gesturing hands nearly brushes against Yue Qingyuan’s robes.

Xiao-Jiu remains furiously silent.

Normally, he would have a sharp remark to make. Yue Qingyuan glances towards him at times, but the man does not ever look back. He only keeps his glare on the family coming towards them, gripping his fan the way one would grip a sword.
He does not correct Shen Yuan, nor does he snap at the boy to be quiet. There is not even the curl of his mouth turning into a snarl, a common expression when he listens to idiocy.

Of course, Shen Yuan is clearly not an idiot.

But Shen Qingqiu remains quiet and unmoving until, finally, his voice cracks like a whip to their ears.

“Disciple Shen, be *presentable,”* he says and Shen Yuan startles into a ramrod position, a *squeak* of all things escaping him. Yue Qingyuan does not laugh, but it is a close thing.

Shortly after, the Zhao family comes to a stop before them.

Upon a first glance, they would be impressive. Yue Qingyuan has seen many nobles dress up for meetings with any kind of cultivator, even more so for meetings involving himself. They have often ended up looking gaudy and unimpressive, greediness shining through.

These have not.

Their winter robes are of the finest furs and cloth. The colors are not garishly bright, their fingers are not heavy with too many rings. Everything has been exactly calculated to show wealth, but not arrogance. Even their attending servants do not look poor.

Lady Zhao appears elegant. Lord Zhao appears dignified. Their appearances match, and Lady Zhao’s hand rests in the crook of her husband’s arm. Her nails are long and painted, sharp like claws.

A united front.

Their son’s eyes briefly land on Shen Yuan. They narrow when he smiles, and Yue Qingyuan does not move as Shen Yuan takes a hurried step closer to himself. He pretends he does not see how the boy nearly reaches for him, even as his heart swells. Even as his own eyes turn cold when he looks at their guests.

“Welcome to Cang Qiong Mountain,” he says instead, and his smile returns with that edge as the family of Zhao bows and smiles back.

Shen Yuan doesn’t know where to look.

He hasn’t known where to look ever since Shen Qingqiu dragged him out of the house and from the pile of books Shen Yuan had done his very best to melt into. He hasn’t known where to look since that morning, after Luo Binghe snuck back out and Shen Yuan had done his very best to make *no eye contact* with the Scum villain himself.

That had been nerves. This is different.

Shen Yuan sits and is grateful they are using actual chairs. That there is no attempt at seeming relaxed, that there is a proper table between him and Zhao De and Zhao De’s family.

His fingers itch. Shen Qingqiu had circulated his qi that morning, an occurrence neither had liked, palm pressed to his back and energy forcing the fire inside into embers. Now, though, he's grateful for that too. It lessens the risk of any explosions.

He has a lot to be grateful for. Yup. It's important to remember that.

Shen Yuan also feels like he is about to throw up any minute. Every word feels like it comes from far away, polite sentences exchanged over tea sounding muffled to the static in his brain. Shen Qingqiu sits with his fan unfolded, face half-hidden, on Shen Yuan's left side. Yue Qingyuan sits on his right. The man's hands are politely clasped and resting on the table.

Really, shouldn't the sect leader be in the middle? Like, he knows this meeting is all about him and the bully of the year who sits across him! But he doesn't *need* the extra attention! Truly!

Would throwing up get him out of the meeting?

Or would it just get him killed? Would Shen Qingqiu decide shit wasn't worth it and just wham-bam execute Shen Yuan on the spot for being gross? *Would it still be fucking worth it???*

"This one understands that our son committed a grave error," Lord Zhao says. His neat hair is the color of chestnuts. His eyes are dark brown, the same shade as Zhao De's. He hasn't spared Shen Yuan a single glance since he arrived. "Cutting another's hair is… truly unacceptable. However, that should not stop him from earning forgiveness."

"We know that our son was a good student. A friend of your head disciple Ming," Lady Zhao picks up. Shen Yuan can't help but make sure her hands remain on her side of the table.

Her nails are long and painted a dark red. Filed into sharp points, and he has to look away as the brand itches on his neck. It's hidden from view, he has to remind himself. Shen Qingqiu had made a new talisman just for this meeting. It's fine. And Lady Zhao wouldn't do *that.* That's political suicide. If she tried to reach across the table–

She won't.

Shen Qingqiu would find it insulting.
Yue Qingyuan is too kind to let anyone do such a thing.
He's *safe.* It's stupid to worry.

Shen Yuan realizes he has zoned out. He blinks and tries to focus back in, Lady Zhao still speaking. Her voice is nice. Crisp and elegant, her words well-spoken. She speaks like Zhao De.

"– he is too talented to be wasted. Surely there is a compromise we can reach? Denying him the education, denying him a *sword* when he has already achieved a golden core… we only wish to find a compromise so that he may continue his training."

Lady Zhao's eyes wrinkle at the corners, her smile charming, her eyes almost warm. Zhao De has her black hair, but her eyes are dark gray. She looks comfortable and not at all like Shen Qingqiu is throwing a killer glare her way. Her earrings are golden birds.

"Perhaps he could be assigned to Qiong Ding instead?" she suggests.

Ah, Shen Yuan thinks, dazed. So that's their play. When he had first heard Shen Qingqiu complain about them, he had imagined a Karen kind of situation. Unreasonable boomers who tried to bully their way forward. Red faces screaming and demanding retribution.

But this isn't it.

Reassigning Zhao De to a different peak would be a good compromise in any other situation. But Qing Jing is ranked second highest in the Cang Qiong Mountain. It would be *bad,* of course, for them to have their son enter a *lesser* peak.

Zhao De probably would be a good fit for Qiong Ding. It's all about diplomatic relations, making sure the peaks get along, making sure no outsiders try to bulldoze their way in. They negotiate terms. They're the *face* of Cang Qiong Mountain.

He's a bully, but he's good with his words. He isn't a peacock like Ming Fan and he's not stupid like Cui Wenyan. Zhao De is clever.

Zhao De is smiling that falsely kind smile and under the table, Shen Yuan grasps at Yue Qingyuan's sleeve. It's a childish, stupid move but he feels like he is about to die from how hard his heart is beating. So he holds Yue Qingyuan's sleeve between his thumb and index finger.

"Qiong Ding is of a higher rank than Qing Jing," Shen Qingqiu says, voice colder than a winter storm, "you are asking us to *reward* your son's behavior."

"He does not have to be assigned to Qiong Ding," Lord Zhao hurries to say, because that is how bargaining works. You aim as high as you can and let yourself be whittled down to second best. "Wan Jian Peak is also a possibility, if you would honor us with it." Lord Zhao looks back towards Yue Qingyuan. Dismissing Shen Qingqiu from the discussion.

The sect leader is sitting very still. He looks relaxed, but he doesn't *feel* relaxed. His smile is polite and small when Shen Yuan dares to peek up at it. Yue Qingyuan hasn't freed his sleeve from the clingy grasp.

"And why would we accept him back?" Shen Qingqiu snaps, clearly displeased with the attempts at ignoring him. "His punishment is clear. He has been kicked out, and he will *remain* as such. It is not a punishment one would lightly retract."

"We believe that the punishment was decided on too quickly," Lady Zhao says, and Shen Yuan wishes they would let Zhao De speak even as he is deeply grateful that they're not. It's just- he keeps fucking *smiling* at Shen Yuan. A cat waiting for the mouse to stick its head out.

“It may have had a personal bias and not been given a proper… consideration.”

“What kind of personal bias are you referring to?” Yue Qingyuan asks.

“There is a certain… likeness, between Lord Shen Qingqiu and… disciple *Shen* Yuan,” Lady Zhao points out. She says it delicately. As if she doesn’t want to *offend.* But her eyes have that glint that Zhao De has. Shen Yuan kind of expects her to just randomly pull out a new pair of scissors. “But of course, one wouldn’t wish to *presume.* Only, our son wished to defend his master’s reputation.”

“By cutting the hair off of a disciple three years his junior?” Yue Qingyuan asks. The Zhaos pause, briefly exchanging a glance, before they focus back on Yue Qingyuan.

“Can you truly claim a slave to be a disciple?” Lord Zhao asks and Shen Yuan’s breath hitches. He does not clutch at his neck. Instead he stares at the table, tracing the grains in the wood with his eyes and *breathes.*

Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

“He is not a *slave.* I see that Zhao De is a liar as well as a bully,” he says with a sneer, the fan snapping closed as if to ensure everyone can see just how deeply unimpressed he is.

“Our son would not lie about such a thing.”

“But he would lie about others?” Shen Qingqiu shoots back, “I do not show *bias.* Your son is blessed indeed that I did not cut *his* hair before I threw him out. If the decision had been mine, he would have been whipped as well.”

Lady Zhao gasps.

“Lord Shen!”

“We apologize, only we see no reason for our son to lie about a slave brand,” Lord Zhao cuts in, and Shen Yuan feels dazed and cold but it’s- it’s almost funny, watching the man try to grasp at any control he may have had. “And with Qing Jing Peak having such a spotless reputation, we were merely worried.”

“And where would this *brand* be? Zhao De.”

Zhao De sits up straighter. He almost looks apologetic, but Shen Yuan has memorized most of his evil stupid faces. He isn’t fooled.

“At the back of his neck,” the older boy says, “I truly meant no offense to Shizun when I… lost control of my emotions. Only, he was claiming to be your… he was claiming to be your kin, and as you had made no claim on him I merely wished to defend your honor.”

Oh, that was just outright lying.

“There is none there,” Yue Qingyuan says, even though he hasn’t seen the back of Shen Yuan’s neck. It’s just a blatant lie and a dare to call him out on it, and Shen Yuan looks at him and- and he is still holding onto Yue Qingyuan’s sleeve. The man’s fondness for him must be great indeed if he has yet to shake him off. Maybe…

“Gege,” he says, and feels Shen Qingqiu stiffen next to him. On the other side of the table, the Zhao family startles. Yue Qingyuan turns to look at him, eyes a little too wide with surprise, “does it truly matter if someone is a slave?”

The silence in the room lays thick like a blanket. To others, it must be suffocating. But to Shen Yuan it only feels safe as he watches Yue Qingyuan’s cold, polite smile grow warm and softer.

“Of course it does not, Xiao-Yuan,” he fondly says, and the System *pings* with F-points, numbers flashing, “But that is not the problem here. The problem is that they claim a falsehood about you is true. Even if it *was* true,” and his eyes grow sharp as he looks back to them, “it would not matter and I do not understand what it has to do with this discussion.”

The Lord and Lady Zhao stares.
Even Zhao De’s brown eyes are wide with shock, hurriedly flicking between the sect leader and disciple, as if trying to make sense of what just happened. For once he doesn’t look handsome and cruel, he just looks like a lost teenager.

Perhaps they had relied on the rumors surrounding Shen Qingqiu and Yue Qingyuan; that their relationship was strained beyond belief.

Of course, it *is* the truth.

Just not the way some would expect.

He doesn’t think Zhao De has ever heard how often Shen Qingqiu tells their sect leader to stop calling him *Xiao-Jiu.*

Shen Yuan has heard it one too many times.

He glances towards Shen Qingqiu and nearly jumps out of his skin for it; where before the man had been laser focused on the noble family before them, now the Scum villain is staring at Yue Qingyuan.

To an outsider he looks cold and blank. Shen Yuan, who has spent several weeks trying to earn favor as a teacher’s pet, sees the blatant shock for what it is.

“This meeting was something *you* requested,” Yue Qingyuan continues, and oh shit, he got a glint of *steel* in his eyes now. Suddenly he very much reminds Shen Yuan of the character he read about, the cool one that even full demon lord Luo Binghe had been wary of. “After your son assaulted Xiao-Yuan,” and the giddy glee bubbling in Shen Yuan’s chest easily shoves aside any fears he had, because Yue Qingyuan is making a *point* using that endearment and the faces they are making are *hilarious,* “and was *mercifully* given a light punishment in

turn."

"This one- this one *must* reject such a statement!" Lady Zhao says, the sudden change of dynamics flustering her enough for her to drop the graceful, motherly act. Shen Yuan remembers Zhao De mentioning having a bastard brother that the whole family hated.

Was that what she had hoped for?

That everyone would feel something like that shame over Shen Yuan's existence? That none would care, would even welcome any bad thing to him?

It would have worked, maybe. A few weeks ago. Before Zhao De did what he did. Cutting hair *is* a big deal, after all.

"Being rejected by a sect that our son has spent years with is not a light punishment! We understand, of course, that he made a grave error but surely he has been an exemplary student until now? Surely one mistake out of a misguided attempt at honoring his master should offer him a chance to make things right?"

"Who do you think decided your son's punishment?"

The question comes from Shen Qingqiu; he has recovered from his shock, it seems. Or at least enough to hide it behind his fan as he snaps it open once more.

"Was it not Lord Shen?" Lord Zhao asks.

"As I said; if I had made the decision, it would have been a far harsher one," and there is a soft, almost sweet tone to his voice.

Shen Yuan inches away. He can't go far, but Yue Qingyuan doesn't seem to mind when he bumps into him.

"The one who was *merciful* was Shen Yuan. Perhaps instead of your attempts to slander him, you should be grateful that your son did not face a worse punishment."

This now has them all turn shocked looks towards him. Shen Yuan doesn't yelp nor does he shy away; he sits stiffly and wills himself to not blush with horror and embarrassment.

"... he bit our son."

"Xiao-Yuan is a kind child," Yue Qingyuan proudly says, "and a resourceful one."

This time, Shen Yuan *does* blush.

"Biting and kicking out Zhao De from our sect may not be what I would have done," Yue Qingyuan then admits, "but it is perhaps preferred to what I would have chosen."

"Surely… surely Lord Yue can't be serious?"

“I would have cut off the hands that harmed Xiao-Yuan.”

Dead silence.

Shen Yuan stares at Yue Qingyuan, whose smile is perfectly polite if one ignores the *insanity* he just spouted. Shen Yuan thinks even Shen Qingqiu is in deep shock. He doesn’t dare take a peek.

The Zhao family is paler than death.

“Shall we end it there?” Yue Qingyuan says.

It’s not a suggestion.

Qiong Ding Peak is very different from Qing Jing.

It is less green, first of all. The only bamboo kept on it is tastefully placed out, a decoration that may offer some respite from the winds at the highest peak of the mountain. The stairs are of white stone with art chiseled into every step, understated and elegant. Everyone is dressed in various shades of gray and black, no uniform truly the same as the other. Diplomacy requires some flexibility.

The buildings are more detailed. More *refined* , somehow, and not that homely feeling that Qing Jing has. The roofs are not gently curved like hills, the houses do not seem like they invite you to sit down and study. They are there to be used for Official Sound Things, beautiful and ethereal and very much giving off a sense of authority.

It’s cool. It is!

Shen Yuan thinks he would appreciate it more if his mind wasn’t still reeling. If he wasn’t watching Zhao De and his family and their servants walking down the stairs towards the rainbow bridge, their long journey having been abruptly cut short because no one knew.

No one knew that the sect leader is *fucking insane.*

Shen Yuan sure as hell didn’t.

“What was that?” Shen Qingqiu asks the way a cat would dig in its claws, and Shen Yuan ducks his head and dares to move his eyes just enough that he can watch the two Lords.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes are set on Yue Qingyuan.

The green glare is a piercing one, the tilted mouth that he and Shen Yuan share has been twisted into something strange. It's not disapproval, not quite, but it is *something.* He thinks that even the Scum villain was taken aback by Yue Qingyuan's words.

Yue Qingyuan looks at him. His hands are clasped behind his back. He stands tall and proud, in that oddly approachable way he has. His smile is smaller than the one he had at the meeting, and all the more genuine.

"What was what?" he politely asks.

Shen Qingqiu bristles. Shen Yuan doesn't even dare to *breathe,* terrified that they will stop whatever the fuck they're doing, but also he would very much want to leave. But also he wants to *stay.*

"You know what!" Shen Qingqiu snaps, uncaring of their surroundings. Not that any wish to walk closer to the Qing Jing Peak Lord. "What are you playing at, acting in such a manner?"

"Xiao-Jiu–"

"Do *not* call me that."

Yue Qingyuan watches him for a moment. The breeze swoops past them, spreading out Shen Qingqiu's hair like a dark sail, only making the other man look more furiously confused.

Shen Yuan can't even *blame* him.

He is also confused! Not angrily so, but like, what the fuck!
What happened to make Yue Qingyuan like *that???*
Hand chopping! Chopping off *hands!*

"And do not call *him* that either," Shen Qingqiu adds in a snap after the silence drags on for too long. Yue Qingyuan does an almost-frown, his eyes briefly landing on Shen Yuan before they return to Shen Qingqiu.

"Perhaps we should not discuss such things where a child can hear?" he gently suggests.

"Oh, you care so much about his opinion? Is that it? You have found another stray to push your guilt on?"

What the fuck is going on.

"Of course not. I merely wish to be supportive."

Shen Qingqiu laughs. It is not a very nice laugh.

"Supportive! That boy doesn't need your support," he hisses, "I know perfectly well what

you are, and I will *not* let you shove your guilt at someone else. If you are going to say such… *things,* then at the very least do it for the right reasons! Now you have made outsiders think our sect is led by a mad man. And they may be right!"

"Shidi," Yue Qingyuan says, finally taking a step closer. It makes the distance go from polite to intimate.

Shen Qingqiu whips his fan up; stabs at Yue Qingyuan's chest with it, stopping him from coming closer. Yue Qingyuan settles back. Shen Qingqiu's cheeks have turned red in what must be anger, the color highlighting the green of his eyes.

Shen Yuan tries to remember *ever* seeing the man so pissed off.

Not even when Shen Yuan was mouthing off, snapping and rude. Perhaps it was because it was in private. Perhaps because there was no need to take a child seriously.

"It is better," Shen Qingqiu says so quietly that Shen Yuan barely hears it, "to aim your guilt at *me* rather than some brat you don't know."

Yue Qingyuan stares.

Shen Yuan sneezes and immediately wants to let the winds sweep him away, but it is too late. Whatever weird moment was happening is now broken.

Shen Qingqiu turns away, face back to being blank and cold if one ignores the lingering red on his cheeks. A motion with his fingers has Xiu Ya unsheathing, the blade hovering near the white stones of Qiong Ding Peak. He wastes no time stepping up on it, and then throws a glare at a frozen Shen Yuan that could flay a man alive.

"Get on," he orders and Shen Yuan scrambles to obey, having to stand in front of him to do so, having to trust the man to not let him fall. The blade starts moving.

He looks towards Yue Qingyuan. The man is staring at them both with an expression he hasn't ever seen before. His eyes linger on the back of Shen Qingqiu who refuses to return it. As Shen Yuan watches, he raises a hand before he lets it fall. He looks lost. Confused. As if he had something within reach but botched it.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to say goodbye. Shen Qingqiu swats at him with the fan, the wood of it bumping against his face, forcing him to flinch away to instead stare straight forward. Even then, he imagines he can feel Yue Qingyuan's stare as they leave.

It is a very long flight back.

Chapter End Notes

My favorite canon fact is that SJ not only murdered a bunch of disciples at the Immortal Alliance Conference, but that YQY didn't care even as he literally saw him do it. He covered it up! He still brought SJ to the sect, even though it's very likely that SJ killed disciples OF SAID SECT!!!
True love! True dedication! YQY my beloved <3

SY: Gege?
YQY: I will kill for you.
SQQ: the fuck

SY: I think our sect leader might be insane?
LBH: really? do you need protection? I'll do it! I'll protect you from everything!
SY: he said he would cut off Zhao De's hands for hurting me???
LBH:
LBH, thinking: that's just sane behavior, isn't it?

There's fanart!!!!

Chapter 5: Friendodo drew the attack on LQG and it is great!

Chapter 6:
Friendodo also drew SY having a rough time! He is so upset, poor bby. Someone hug him pls. But also he might try to force those game pieces down the throat of whoever touches him next, hm.
Lady Dysnomia drew amazing portraits of before and after haircut!SY! Oh it is LOVELY!

Chapter 8: Dolly drew adorable art of SY and LBH sharing a bed and, of course, a very sparkly SQQ.
And more adorable art by Lady Dysnomi AHHH

Chapter 9: Anqelbean drew an absolutely adorable and heartwarming bed-sharing scene <3 (and a bonus SQQ!)

Thank you guys!!!! (sorry for the long ramble lmao)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library of Qing Jing Peak is a place that Luo Binghe has grown increasingly familiar with in the past year that he and Shen Yuan joined the Cang Qiong sect.

It is the largest library within the whole sect. It is not dusty. Every book is read far too often for such a thing to happen, even the ancient tomes which you need permission from a master to read. The shelves reach the ceiling; no fire is allowed within it, and there are no windows for fear of damaging the knowledge housed within. Night pearls are instead used. What Luo Binghe now knows is an incredibly rare and treasured source of light hangs from the ceiling within glass bowls, the library large enough to need *hundreds* of them. Their glow is soft yet lights up enough that his eyes never feel strain.

It is a place he and Shen Yuan often had to sneak into before Zhao De was exiled. The hard part was getting in without being dragged away, or to get out without that same thing happening. But now they are allowed to visit in peace and Shen Yuan has often tugged Luo Binghe with him.

After all, Cui Wenyan does all of Yuan's chores. It means that his friend has far more time than before, and he is so excited to share all that he learns. It is where Luo Binghe finds himself waiting, worrying.

He doesn't know how long a meeting is supposed to take. He has never been to one, and it feels like a meeting with Zhao De's family should take forever. He hopes it doesn't- the idea of Yuan having to spend so much time in a room with *him* is an awful thought that makes Luo Binghe wish he could have come along. He knows that Shen Qingqiu and Yue Qingyuan will be there but it doesn't help.

Luo Binghe puts aside a book for later; it's about the flora in the Abyss, though he wonders how accurate it actually is. After all, every account seems to be taken from *demons* of all things. Either way, Yuan will find it far more fascinating than Luo Binghe.

And then there he is; stomping off snow by the entrance, tugging at his fluffy hat and looking all around the library. When he sees Luo Binghe by one of the corner tables well within view of the entrance, Shen Yuan lights up like the sun itself.

Luo Binghe could melt with relief; he looks fine. His cheeks are flushed from the cold, his fluffy hat tugged down to hide his ears and he's perfectly, wonderfully fine.

Yuan goes to sit down but Luo Binghe tugs him into a hug, making the other boy nearly fall into his lap. There's a squawk of protest, but Luo Binghe doesn't care. He pulls back to pat Yuan down for injuries, only stopping after the fourth swat at his hands.

“You’re so *fussy,”* Yuan complains, face red, and Luo Binghe smiles.

“Yuan needs to be fussed over,” he says, which earns him a light shove. He rocks with it, his smile turning into a grin.

“Stop,” Yuan says, then grimaces, “don’t turn into Shibo.”

“What?”

“I think he’s insane,” Yuan tells him, abruptly looking haunted. Luo Binghe sits up straight, worry clawing at him until Yuan continues, “he threatened Zhao De!”

Luo Binghe blinks.

“Oh, alright,” he says, deciding that perhaps Zhangmen-shibo can be trusted. Unlike Shizun. “Have you eaten?”

“Shizun said I would just throw up at the meeting if I did, as if I’m a baby. And it’s *not* alright! It’s- sorry, sorry,” Yuan apologizes to the librarian, an older man whose raised eyebrow is enough to remind Yuan about his noise level, “We will- I will be quiet.”

“Let’s go and eat,” Luo Binghe says, sweeping the two books he had set aside for Yuan into his arms- the Abyss flora and one about spiders, because Yuan has obsessed about the spider in the dormitories lately- “these are for you,” he explains and goes to get permission to check them out. The talismans slapped onto them will make sure that people are careful with them for fear of death. Or, at least, very sore hands.

“Oh! Oh, what- ooooh,” Yuan breathes, and then pouts when Luo Binghe won’t let him grab them, twisting to keep them out of Yuan’s reach, “if they’re for me, let me at least carry them, Binghe.”

“Yuan hasn’t eaten.”

“And what does that have to do with *anything–”*

He manages to keep the books safe from Shen Yuan’s delightfully greedy hands until they get to the dining hall. But once there, food has stopped being served which leaves Luo Binghe with the duty to ensure Shen Yuan has a full belly.

The moment he puts the books down, Shen Yuan buries his nose in them. He of course picks up the one on Abyss flora, the cover a deep red. Shen Yuan holds it carefully even as he jumps up to sit on one of the counters, legs dangling as he flips it open. He’s well out of reach to be in the way, but just perfect enough that Luo Binghe only has to look to the side to see him.

“This one wonders… what did they say?” he asks as he begins to prepare food. Something that can be eaten quickly, he decides. It’s been *hours* since Yuan should have eaten. “At the meeting?”

Yuan doesn't answer until Binghe pokes at him.

"What-? Oh! Well, um. It's. Not much? Zhao De isn't returning, though, but again Shibo said… and then Shizun… well, Shizun didn't let this one come back inside the house after. Not that I wasn't going to find Binghe immediately, of course," Yuan hurried to assure him, though his eyes shine with giddy glee as he continues, "but I only wanted to borrow one of the books I found in Shizun's house. It was so interesting, Binghe, it was about these heavenly beasts that sometimes show up and what if the spider in the dormitories is one?"

The leap of logic is insane.

Binghe bites back a laugh, and instead encourages Shen Yuan to continue. He listens as his best friend rambles, Yuan's hand only sometimes going to touch his neck, but mostly his hands stay on the book. Luo Binghe thinks that maybe Yuan seems more lively than before. Like a burden has been lifted.

They will be alright, he decides, remembering how he had managed to sneak into Yuan's bedroom the previous night. They will both be able to sleep now, and all it requires is Luo Binghe being sneaky. Yuan won't make things explode or suffer any qi deviations and winter is nearing its end.

Zhao De is gone and Shen Yuan is finally safe.

The rest of the day passes too slow and too quick all at once. Shen Yuan feels like he has this strange energy inside, restless and giddy and almost nauseous with- with *something.*

He stays away from the bamboo house because Shen Qingqiu had been so clearly furious when they returned, face still red and lips thin and looking about five seconds away from eating his own damn fan.

Instead Shen Yuan lets Luo Binghe drag him to the kitchens where delicious food is served, back to the library where they read about the plant life of the Abyss (very handy! For the future! Half of it is wrong, but *still)* and then, when Ning Yingying disrupts the quiet peace by climbing bookshelves for the prettiest looking ones and they are as a result glared into leaving by the librarian, the three of them instead goes out to the pavilion where he and Luo Binghe once bit the Bai Zhan Peak Lord. Zhao De is once more brought up.

"I nailed him real good," Ning Yingying proudly tells them, her cheeks flushed pink and brown eyes curling into crescents from how wide her smile is, "just, smack! Right in the head. But I forgot to add the rock in," she adds, a bit mournfully.

Luo Binghe assures her it's fine, and they briefly ponder if they can catch up to try another snowball attack- now with rocks.

Terrifying.

Was the childhood wife always so vicious? Was *Binghe* so vicious, this early on? He's pretty sure *not.* But Shen Yuan can't really bring himself to care. He braids Luo Binghe's hair as they speak of terrifying things and barely minds when Ning Yingying leans over Binghe to stare at Shen Yuan's hands, too close and personal but ultimately he decides Luo Binghe's hair is too soft and his own hands too restless to stop. He just leans away as much as he can without losing track of the braid.

It feels like he blinks and suddenly the sun is setting, the moon already rising, the snow catching those silver rays and never letting the darkness of night truly settle in. He waves goodbye to his friends and shares a smile with Luo Binghe before he leaves.

Ning Yingying doesn't know, of course. She had been absolutely awful at keeping secrets in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* half of the time only landing Luo Binghe in trouble. Shen Yuan is *not* taking the risk, thanks.

When he returns to the bamboo house, there is still light in the windows. Shen Yuan is careful to stomp off the snow before he shuffles inside, the warmth like a pressure against his cheeks when he does. It seems like Shen Qingqiu is on a mission to use up all the excess firewood that Binghe has chopped the past year; Shen Yuan hurries to get out of his winter clothes for fear of melting on the spot.

"This one greets Shizun," he says and receives no response.

Fucking rude.

Shen Qingqiu is by his desk. He's doing- something? From where Shen Yuan stands, he can't see if he is drawing or writing. All he sees is the long, slow motions of Shen Qingqiu dipping a brush in ink before returning to the paper before him. He's crowded by books and paperwork, shielding whatever it is fully from view.

Shen Yuan eyes the desk.

Come to think of it, Shen Qingqiu is kind of a slob, isn't he?

Or no, not a slob. But he isn't very *neat.* With his personality and strict standards, Shen Yuan kind of expected the guy to be super particular about how things are placed. But instead books are piled in small, wobbly towers and paperwork seems to be sorted by 'done' and 'not done' rather than what type it is. Even the shelf where he keeps his little fan collection isn't neat.

If it was Shen Yuan's collection, he would have proper… like… things. For that. Something that helped the fans be spread out and in view, a proper display, not just kind of haphazardly

thrown onto what looks like a dresser, some unfolded and some shut tight.

He picks one up.

“Put that down,” Shen Qingqiu says without looking up.

Shen Yuan flushes and puts it back down with a *click,* then glares at the man because come *on.* He hadn’t even unfolded it or nothing!

“I was only looking!” he defends himself.

“I don’t want your sticky hands on my things,” Shen Qingqiu cooly replies, “and everything has a place.”

“Could have fooled me,” he mutters.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes snap to him. Shen Yuan grimaces.

“Care to repeat that?” Shen Qingqiu sweetly asks.

“N-No, Shizun.”

“Hmpf.”

Shen Qingqiu returns to whatever he’s doing. Maybe he’s drawing up new torture methods. Or maybe he liked Yue Qingyuan’s insane words and is drawing Zhao De with all his limbs chopped off- which would be *super* ironic and also disturbing.

Shen Yuan fidgets. Slowly, he tugs off the hat, feeling sweaty wearing it. He folds it and unfolds it as he tries to figure out what to do, to say. He’s supposed to be in bed soon, sure, but like… Binghe won’t come for a while, so he won’t fall asleep anyway. They have to wait for all the lights to go out.

Except their Shizun does *not* look like he plans to sleep.

“Do you sleep?” Shen Yuan blurts out, then hurries to make sense of it, cheeks hot and hands wringing the hat when Shen Qingqiu sends him an unimpressive glare, “I mean- this one means, cultivators don't need to, right? Like eating? Y-You can practice inedia and sh- stuff.”

“... it is not recommended to go without sleep for too long. Or nourishment,” Shen Qingqiu slowly says. There’s a glint in his eyes that Shen Yuan doesn’t like. “Why does Shen Yuan ask?”

Hm. Don’t like *that* tone for sure.

“This one was just curious,” he says, trying hard to *not* think about Binghe. With his luck, Shen Qingqiu can read minds! Sure he couldn’t in the original, but Shen Yuan doesn’t trust shit. He feels like Zhao De *definitely* should have been mentioned in the original way fucking

more than Ming Fan.

“Strange curiosity to have.”

“Is it?” Shen Yuan forces a laugh, “I mean, I- my sleep! I have had problems with it, as Shizun knows. Not a strange question at all. I would rather not sleep, obviously, if I could help it.”

“Your core is far from ready for such a thing. Speaking of- go to your room,” Shen Qingqiu scoffs, turning back to his work once more. It feels like Shen Yuan disappointed him. Shit. Why would he though? Surely it’s common to have *some* sleep troubles. Luo Binghe sure had them in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.*

Granted it was mostly after the Abyss, not before, but…

And also it still feels *so weird* to have Shen Qingqiu order him to his room. Shen Yuan briefly entertains the idea of protesting. But then he remembers the books he got to bring back and how dark his bedroom gets.

“Could I bring a lantern?” he asks.

“Why would you need that?” Shen Qingqiu snaps and then, before Shen Yuan can reply, he nods towards one sitting on a shelf, close to falling off from how it’s pressed against the very edge of it. “Take it.”

Well, as long as Shen Yuan can read in bed, he can tolerate the rude bitch that is Shen Qingqiu. He still sticks his tongue out at the man when his back is turned.

The bedroom remains as bare and sad looking as it had that morning. Shen Yuan puts aside the fur hat, changes his clothes to proper sleep attire and tugs off the talisman clinging to his skin. He lays down on top of the blanket, putting the lantern by the window so that he can read until Binghe shows up. The glow of it is warm and soothing.

He *obviously* reads the one on Abyss flora.

It takes a while, but eventually he can hear the sound of Shen Qingqiu’s bedroom door. Shen Yuan peeks up from the book and towards the window; after a moment, Luo Binghe peeks over the edge, looking very much like a mischievous puppy. His eyes sparkle when they catch the light from the lantern.

Shen Yuan has to hold back a laugh as he hurries to put the book aside, to get out of bed and tip-toe over to the window.

“Hi,” he whispers as he manages to push it open. Luo Binghe smiles back at him, cheeks flushed from the cold in such a way that he thinks maybe Binghe had been outside for longer than he first assumed. Probably the protagonist decided to wait until all the other windows went dark before he dared to check if the coast was clear.

“Hi,” Luo Binghe whispers back and moves to climb inside.

His hand does a weird, sliding movement. They both stare at it. Binghe frowns, and tries again to grasp at the window ledge. Again his hand slides off the air itself before he can touch it, like it’s slippery soap and not fucking *wood.*

“What…?” Luo Binghe mumbles, trying again, nearly punching the air with the force he puts into it.

“What the fuck,” Shen Yuan hisses, ignoring the almost delighted look he gains from Binghe for swearing, “what is… try and punch the opening,” he tells his friend, moving to the side.

Luo Binghe puts on a determined face and punches.

His fist bounces off of the air itself, looking comedic and bizarre. But there! Shen Yuan sticks his hand out no problem, pulls it back in. There had been some kind of… wall of air, right there, which had shimmered like water when Luo Binghe put enough force into it. But Shen Yuan could push *his* hand through- so that meant it was only a problem from the outside!

Shen Yuan backs up, mind running, trying to remember where he recognizes it from. But *wow* the floor is so fucking cold, he kind of awkwardly hops on his toes as quietly as he can to avoid *frostbite, holy shit.*

It’s only when he backs up that he realizes there are talismans by the window. There are four, to be specific; two on each side of it, tiny pieces of paper that he hadn’t even noticed because, well, why would he? The room had been dark and he had settled down to *read.*

But he knows enough that they for sure weren’t there last night, nor that morning. Shen Yuan frowns at them.

“I think Shizun knows,” he says.

“So I can’t get in?” Binghe asks, deflating like a balloon. Shen Yuan can’t resist reaching out to pat his fluffy hair, shaking his head.

“It should be easy,” Shen Yuan reassures him, pulling his hand back to poke at the closest talisman, “this one is sure I only need to peel one of them. It should be harmless.”

“Should be?” Luo Binghe repeats, looking alarmed, “Yuan, don’t-”

“Pssht, it’s fine,” he says and rips it off like a band-aid.

It lights up like fireworks.

Sparks of red and gold cascade, the sound loud and popping. He yelps and throws it away, shaking his hand at how his fingers sting from it, wincing before he puts them in his mouth, because *ouch.*

“Yuan!” Luo Binghe gasps, immediately getting inside, clumsy and stiff from being outside for so long. Which is a bad, bad idea because of course the sound of the talisman–

The door slides open. Aggressively.

They both stare at Shen Qingqiu, frozen. Luo Binghe halfway up from the floor, Shen Yuan with fingers in his mouth.

“Did you *really* think I wouldn’t know?” Shen Qingqiu asks.

The room had been getting colder the longer the window stayed open. And yet it has nothing on the frigid tone in Shen Qingqiu’s voice, or the way he stares at them. Like a cat with two stupid, stupid mice that he can’t wait to gut.

Shen Yuan slowly pulls his fingers out of his mouth.

“Go back to your dorm,” Shen Qingqiu orders Luo Binghe.

“Wha- I’m sure, that is,” Shen Yuan moves in between them, tries to dry his stupid hand off on his robes as subtly as possible, heart racing, “can’t he- please let him stay? Shizun?”

Shen Qingqiu takes one step inside. He *looms* over them, a sudden reminder of just how much taller he is than them. He is still wearing the robes from before. He was waiting for this to happen, Shen Yuan realizes. The bastard was *waiting* for this.

“This master said no when asked for permission,” Shen Qingqiu says, that same cold, soft tone to his voice that mesmerizes, a snake swaying back and forth before it strikes, “so what does Shen Yuan think should be done when this one is *disobeyed?”*

Ohhhh fuuuuck.

He can feel himself grow pale, and he clutches at his own robes to ground himself. Shen Yuan *really* wants to back up. But that would mean giving space, right? Right??? Which would get Shen Qingqiu closer to Luo Binghe, and that’s just- that is so bad.
So he can’t move.
Even though he *really* wants to.

“Answer me,” Shen Qingqiu says.

“This one will take any punishment,” Luo Binghe blurts out, and Shen Yuan can hear him scrambling to his feet, feeling Luo Binghe brush against him as the other boy stands next to him. “It’s this one’s fault!”

Is the protagonist’s sense of danger broken? Doesn’t he see that Shen Qingqiu is two blinks away from murdering them both??? Doesn’t he realize that whatever the fuck it is that makes them look so much alike, at least it keeps Shen Yuan kind of safe from harm? Which would, of course, mean that Binghe is very much *not!*

“Oh, any punishment?” Shen Qingqiu asks, eyes narrowing into mere slivers of green, glittering like the pointy end of knives, “how *generous* of you,” he mocks, and Shen Yuan can’t help it.

He grabs Luo Binghe’s hand.

The movement has Shen Qingqiu’s eyes snap to their hands; if he looked dangerous before, he looks- well, more so, now. His face twitches as if he wants to twist it up, as if he wants to snarl, and Shen Yuan nearly chokes on his own spit at the sight.

“It was this one’s idea!” he says, too loud, desperation making him nearly yell it, “This one couldn’t sleep, and- and Binghe helps, s-so this one said-”

“Yuan–!”

“It was *my* idea! This one begs Shizun to let Luo Binghe go back to the dormitories without- without punishments. P-please.”

The air feels like sheets of ice. Brittle, sharp, *cold.*

“This master should have you both whipped.”

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both freeze up; his heart races as he processes those words, the way Shen Qingqiu said them. Like it’s a fact, just something he *will do.* Undeniable and unstoppable and–

And no.

Fuck that!

Shen Yuan has spent a whole fucking year laying low because if he didn’t he would end up whipped! *Luo Binghe* would end up whipped, maybe tied up in a woodshed, and- and for just a moment he had thought maybe, just *maybe* Shen Qingqiu wasn’t as bad as the original story claimed. Maybe he could get along with him!

He is *not* letting Binghe get whipped.

“No,” he snaps.

“No?” Shen Qingqiu echoes. His eyes focus on Shen Yuan, awful and fucking *evil,* and all that restless energy is bubbling up now. Like boiling water, scalding as words tumble past his lips.

“Binghe has done nothing wrong! And whipping is a *stupid* punishment, anyway!” he says, knows every word is a mistake but he can’t stop, it’s just flowing out, and his fingers itch again, sparks of light bursting at his fingertips which are still sore from the talisman, forcing him to let go of Luo Binghe’s hand, “it doesn’t teach anything! It’s- it’s bad and fucking idiotic! *You* are an idiot!”

“Get out,” Shen Qingqiu says.

His eyes don't leave Shen Yuan, but he is not speaking to him. He is clearly speaking to Luo Binghe, who stays where he is. Shen Yuan can feel how the protagonist is nearly vibrating with energy, and he knows Luo Binghe won’t leave.

“Get out, or I *will* whip Shen Yuan,” the man says, eyes finally moving to Luo Binghe instead. He sounds serious. Shen Yuan puffs up, hands balling up into fists, energy *building* inside him, and when Luo Binghe doesn’t immediately move, “Don’t test me,” Shen Qingqiu says, and–

And Shen Yuan blinks and Luo Binghe is crawling out the window, slow and reluctant, and he doesn’t- don’t fucking leave, that will let the Scum villain *win*– (but he also doesn’t want to get whipped, is that bad? Is that cowardly? He can’t breathe, his lungs are burning–)

Shen Qingqiu grabs him and Shen Yuan *pushes* energy at him, a blast of pure force that the Scum villain waves away like it’s nothing but an errant bug, and then the man’s cold hand settles on the back of Shen Yuan’s neck.

Qi enters him, cold and vicious, awful, smothering the flames so suddenly that Shen Yuan chokes on a scream, scrambling to claw at the hand, turning to bite because his mind goes blank, doesn’t know what else to do, but it doesn’t work. Another cold hand grabs his chin and holds him in place, somehow keeping *all* of him in place.

The burning fire is doused into nothing but ash.

Shen Yuan slumps; he doesn’t quite fall to the floor, but that is where he ends up. The hands that guided him there leaves and he gasps for breath and glares as best as he can as he tries to remember how to think.

Shen Qingqiu ignores him. He slaps a new talisman onto the spot where Shen Yuan had peeled the previous one. He snaps something at Luo Binghe who is glaring from outside, and Shen Yuan can’t hear. His head is ringing. Whatever it is, it seems to convince Binghe to leave.

The Scum villain returns.

He stares down at Shen Yuan.

He doesn’t look real. The soft glow of the lantern barely touches him where he stands, shadows resting perfectly to make him seem taller, meaner. Ethereal and cruel and Shen Yuan is too aware of how loud his breathing is. How his nails dig at the floorboards.

“Are you done?” Shen Qingqiu asks.

“I hate you,” Shen Yuan spits.

“So you have said,” is the cold reply, “does it look like I care?”

No. It doesn’t.

“Fuck you,” Shen Yuan says instead, wishing for the fire to return and feels nothing but that cold, sharp sensation inside, as if his meridians has been dipped in the Luo river itself, “I’m *happy* I’m not your son. Fuck you! I don’t- I don’t *want* to be related to you, you’re- you deserved everything that happened to you!”

The words make no sense. How can Shen Qingqiu know what happened in *Proud Immortal Demon Way?* He can’t, and so the words make no sense. There should be no impact. It shouldn’t *matter.*

Shen Yuan spits them out and instantly wants to take them back.

Shen Qingqiu stares at him.

Without another word, the man leaves. Shen Yuan stares after him, at the now closed door. The floor is cold. He stares and stares and feels like he is going to throw up.

He doesn’t, in the end.

It takes ages before he can crawl back into bed, limbs too weak to carry him, mind too jumbled and his throat feeling like it’s trying to strangle itself. He pulls the blanket over his head and buries his face against his pillow and tries so very hard to breathe.

He doesn’t cry.

He doesn’t want to leave the bed.

It’s stupid, but Shen Yuan wants to hide under the blanket for as long as he can. He barely slept, anyway. He’s *tired.* There are no explosions, no qi deviations, but he is tired. He doesn’t want to leave the bed. He doesn’t want to go outside and meet Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Yuan hates that he feels bad.

Things were easier when he didn’t consider things *real.* When he was little and the world was big but magical even in all its awfulness. It was easier, then, to just keep his head down and pretend and pretend and *pretend.* Everyone were NPCs and one day he would leave and he would get to meet the real characters.

And they would still be *characters.*

But of course that's not how it works. He fucking knows that. Knew it the first time that sharp nails dug into his skin and he knew it the first time *she* tugged on his hair and crooned *A-Yuan is such a doll–*

It was much easier, is all. When everyone were characters from a shitty story and not real people. Because if someone is evil in a story, they are evil. They deserve to have bad things happen to them.

Shen Qingqiu isn't evil.

He's not *nice,* obviously, but he isn't evil. Now when Shen Yuan can think, he knows that *maybe* Shen Qingqiu wasn't actually going to whip anyone. Shen Yuan doesn't think he will ever be sure of it. But it's not like before, when he was certain.

Shen Qingqiu is a bitch and rude and *mean.*

Shen Qingqiu doesn't deserve having his limbs ripped off.

He doesn't know for how long he has lain there, wallowing because he's too lazy to get out of bed, but eventually the door opens and he hears footsteps. Shen Yuan curls up tighter under the blanket and decides to pretend he's all alone.

"Yuan?" Binghe whispers, and Shen Yuan slowly lifts the blanket.

And there he is; the protagonist himself, in all of his soon-thirteen year old glory. He looks as tired as Shen Yuan feels, dressed in winter clothes and holding a tray filled with food.

"How did you get in?" Shen Yuan blurts out, finally sitting up, "does- does Shizun know…?"

"This one wanted to make sure you were still alive," Luo Binghe admits, putting down the tray in Shen Yuan's lap. There's congee and steamed vegetables, and he wonders if Binghe was scared. If he rushed, thinking he needed an excuse to get inside, and that's why he cooked. "And Shizun let this one in." *After a while,* goes unsaid, but Shen Yuan hears it.

He looks at the food and remembers his stupid, awful words.

"Thank you," Shen Yuan says, and pats the spot next to him, "will Binghe sit?"

"No," Shen Qingqiu says from the other room, sharp as a whip and Shen Yuan twitches, "he will leave now. *Immediately."*

Luo Binghe sends the door a glare worthy of a future demon lord.

"If you don't come to class, I'll come back and make sure you're safe," he promises, fierce and loyal and Shen Yuan doesn't deserve such a good friend. He smiles back, feels it wobble

around the edges, and nods.

“I’ll make sure to be there,” he promises.

When Shen Yuan later leaves the bamboo house, Shen Qingqiu doesn’t spare him a single glance.

He should apologize.

Shen Yuan knows this, but he doesn’t know *how.* And he is kind of still mad. He knows his words were wrong, but it’s not like Shen Qingqiu will ever apologize for whipping kids. It’s not like Shen Qingqiu is kind and has never made Shen Yuan feel small and awful.

Besides, how should he even apologize?

The words had made no sense. Shen Qingqiu doesn’t know that Shen Yuan knows about his past, whatever was revealed in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* The man doesn’t know that Shen Yuan knows that he used to be a slave just like himself, that Shen Qingqiu has a fiance out there who wants him dead and who will end up marrying Binghe after. He doesn’t know that Shen Yuan has read about his slow, awful torture and that he had cheered for it.

So Shen Yuan knows he should apologize.

He doesn’t.

Zhao De is truly gone.

Winter is coming to an end, the sun lingering in the sky longer each day. Shen Yuan is learning in classes and has begun to figure out how to do that one sword maneuver thanks to Luo Binghe’s help. People are staring less.

Things should be *good.*

Mu Qingfang tucks him in, smoothing the blanket down over his back before he stands up. Shen Yuan would complain about being treated like a baby, but he can't even raise his head.

He is so fucking tired.

So instead he stares at the two Peak Lords in his bedroom, feeling disconnected and odd. His insides feel like he is touching tall grass, soft and ticklish, a sharp contrast to how it feels after Shen Qingqiu has smothered the fire within.

This time it hadn't been a fire but rather an inferno. A storm that had ripped at his very core, had made him blow up the door once again before Shen Qingqiu got to him. The inferno had raged so fiercely that even Shen Qingqiu's cold, unforgiving energy couldn't extinguish it.

And so Mu Qingfang had been called.

"Yuan-shizhi should be fine now," Mu Qingfang says. His braid has come undone, just a little. It's probably from when Shen Yuan tried to grab at him, when Shen Yuan was certain he would die . "But Shixiong said he has had similar episodes lately? How often?"

Shen Qingqiu stares at Shen Yuan. His eyes catch the soft lantern light, but where it made Luo Binghe's sparkle with warmth, it only makes the man's eyes glitter like water in the night. Dark and foreboding.

Ironic, considering his eyes are green. Unlike Binghe's black.

"This is the fourth night in a row," is the flat reply.

"Has it become progressively worse?"

Shen Qingqiu finally looks away. Shen Yuan feels like he can breathe again and does so, fingers curling against the bed. He slowly blinks, tries to keep awake as he listens to the two talking about him as if he wasn't there.

Though it's not like he has the energy to talk back.

"Yes," Shen Qingqiu says, "the child has shown a clear decline. It seems that Qian Cao Peak has not given him the proper medicine."

"It is a problem of the heart, Shixiong," Mu Qingfang replies, voice calm, factual. "What Shizhi needs is comfort and safety. Is there not a way to ensure…?"

“No,” Shen Qingqiu snaps.

“If there had been a delay,” Mu Qingfang says, “Shen Yuan could have permanently damaged his meridians.”

Don’t be a petty bitch, is what Shen Yuan hears. And the way Shen Qingqiu bristles, he might hear it too.

“The child is too… codependent,” he says, with disgust in his voice, and Shen Yuan has just enough energy to wrinkle his nose at it, “this one does not wish to *encourage* that.”

“Ah, with Luo-shizhi I assume?” Mu Qingfang says, and hold on!!! Hold the fuck on! He and Binghe weren’t *codependant,* what the fuck! They were best friends! Which was very good, because Luo Binghe was the best. Codependent??? Shen Yuan was sure he would know if they were *that.*

He glared furiously from the bed.

“While it is true that codependency can be an issue, one can work on that later, when Yuan-shizhi has formed a solid foundation and doesn’t run any more risks of qi deviation.” Mu Qingfang pauses and looks over at Shen Qingqiu. “If Luo Binghe’s presence keeps Shizhi’s mind calm, it should be allowed.”

“And that is your professional opinion?” Shen Qingqiu cooly says.

“Yes,” Mu Qingfang replies, and he sends Shen Yuan a smile. However, Shen Yuan is still a bit insulted by the idea of being *codependent* and only frowns back. As best as he can, anyway, because his eyelids feel very heavy. “However, while Shixiong is doing well with calming Shizhi’s meridians, this one would suggest to do so outside of emergencies as well to ease it. The transference of energy can be rough during high-stress situations, and there is a risk of training Shizhi’s meridians to consider outside qi dangerous.”

There’s more after that. He hears Shen Qingqiu reply, sounding pissed off, but the words are far away. Shen Yuan blinks and blinks, each time slower than the last.

Until he is asleep.

Before the fifth night arrives, Shen Qingqiu points with his fan to the fluffy carpet, laid out between the table and the fireplace. It looks warm.

“Sit,” Shen Qingqiu says, and Shen Yuan briefly considers saying no.

He's tired. His body aches, and Ning Yingying had that morning cheerfully told him and Luo Binghe that they had matching eyebags, dark and dreary looking and *do you two even know how to sleep? I can give lessons!* Right before Shen Yuan played the worst rendition of Magnolia in Bloom he had ever done on the guqin because his fingers trembled too much to hit the right strings.

Shen Yuan stares dully at his Shizun, and he remembers Mu Qingfang's words. He grimaces. But he sits; folds his legs under himself and rubs at his face before he stares at the fireplace.

When Shen Qingqiu sits down behind him, Shen Yuan clenches his hands in his lap. As hands that feel too large settle on his back, Shen Yuan digs his nails into his thighs and *breathes.* He stares at the fireplace until he sees black spots from staring at the brightest part of it. He feels Shen Qingqiu's qi enter him, for once not a painful wave of ice.

Instead it feels like–

Like the first time Shen Qingqiu examined him.

Right after the haircut. Cold and refreshing. An uncomfortable contrast that slowly becomes something tolerable and, finally, relaxing.

Shen Yuan releases a shaky breath.

"Your friend cried at me today," Shen Qingqiu says, and then adds, "stay *still,"* when Shen Yuan immediately tries to turn around, as if Shen Qingqiu didn't say the most alarming thing fucking *ever.* "This master did not harm the beast."

"He's not a beast," Shen Yuan snaps.

"You both are," is the derisive reply, "undomesticated little idiots who are rewarded for bad behavior."

Shen Yuan scowls down at his hands.

"That's not true," he protests, trying to focus on the pinch of nails against his legs and not the itchy, creeping feeling of having Shen Qingqiu's hands so close to his neck, to his hair. He can't even see the man. "If we did, Binghe would be *here."*

"There are going to be rules."

Wait.

"What?" Shen Yuan breathes.

"Neither of you will touch *anything* before asking me," Shen Qingqiu says, voice low and threatening but Shen Yuan doesn't care, breath hitching as he realizes just what the man is saying, "and that boy will *only* spend the night here. This master will not allow him to spend

time in this house during the day. You will not sit next to each other in any of your classes."

"That's-"

"If I catch either of you sneaking in and out again, I will have *him* borrow your idiotic idea and sleep in the woodshed. You will not lie again. Once you are able to sleep without waking me with your *lack of control,* he will immediately go back to the student quarters. If he does not help you sleep through the night for the whole next month, he will go back to the student quarters. You will agree to these terms. They are not negotiable."

"But- but what *changed?"* Shen Yuan asks, finally twisting around to stare at Shen Qingqiu, the man having removed his hands. Shen Qingqiu scowls at him, haughty and tall even when sitting. "I was- I'm not- I said-"

"This one is tired of your tantrums," Shen Qingqiu cooly says, "and the sight of the little beast crying was so disgusting that I will allow this experiment. He is pathetic enough that I do not wish to bother with his childish idiocy and clingy nature first thing in the morning."

Right; Shen Yuan knows that Luo Binghe has waited outside the bamboo house every morning since he was first banished from it. The reminder warms his heart and he does a very bad job at holding back a disbelieving smile.

Shen Qingqiu is going to let Luo Binghe *sleep over.*

He knows this is big. He doesn't know why, exactly, but Shen Yuan knows it's a massive thing, a huge change. Ming Fan may very well drown himself in vinegar once he hears of it.

"Thank you," he says, and Shen Yuan smiles so wide his cheeks hurt, "Shizun, *thank you.* I'm sorry about- I said, what I did- but thank you! I'll behave, Binghe will behave, we will follow your rules so well–!"

Shen Qingqiu's scowl grows deeper, his glare sharper. He pulls back and snaps open his fan, haughty and judgemental.

"Stop that," he huffs, "or I won't regrow your hair."

Shen Yuan blinks.

His brain freezes.

"You can *still do that!?"*

Shen Qingqiu looks at him as if he is hopeless; as if he is beyond help, and as if he is terribly insulted that they share a likeness.

"Obviously," he says, voice dripping with judgment.

Shen Yuan wants to strangle him or maybe hug him, both and neither. He stares and stares

until Shen Qingqiu looks tempted to whack him with the fan in his hand.

Binghe knocks on the door.

Shen Yuan scrambles to let him in and decides he can think about all of *that* tomorrow. One more night with bad hair is fine.

Especially with the way Binghe smiles at him when he gets inside.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ and SY: *sleep deprived and Furious About It*
LBH, also sleep deprived: *cries*
SQQ: that is disgusting behavior. I guess you're so pathetic you pose no threat. Ugh. You better not have fucking fleas.

There's fanart!!!!

Chapter 5: Friendodo drew the attack on LQG and it is great!

Chapter 6:
Friendodo also drew SY having a rough time! He is so upset, poor bby. Someone hug him pls. But also he might try to force those game pieces down the throat of whoever touches him next, hm.
Lady Dysnomia drew amazing portraits of before and after haircut!SY! Oh it is LOVELY!

Chapter 8: Dolly drew adorable art of SY and LBH sharing a bed and, of course, a very sparkly SQQ.
And more adorable art by Lady Dysnomi AHHH

Chapter 9: Anqelbean drew an absolutely adorable and heartwarming bed-sharing scene <3 (and a bonus SQQ!)

Chapter 10: WOWWW!!!
Hilarious art of amazing YQY by Friendodo
The power of gege shown here by Lady Dysnomia !!!!
YQY and SQQ being a divorced couple with an adorably hilarious SY caught in the middle byAnqelbean

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An Ding Peak was the peak of roads.

There was not a single untouched piece of grass; everything had been replaced by roads that could make a modern street planner cry with joy, rock slabs smoothed and smothered into being perfectly flat and *kind of* looking vaguely cool if you really, really squinted. Heavy cargo traveling on wheels over hundreds of years tended to kind of make all the cool carvings in the stone floor disappear from just pure and simple time and wear.

An Ding Peak was also packed and planned down to exact measures. There were never too many or too few disciples, and where some peaks could manage to look elegant and refined, An Ding Peak was as busy as a crowded village's marketplace. Colorful too, each specialized part of it color coded to make it easier to organize. You couldn't just dump everything in the same warehouse, or have everyone work everywhere without a specific task! Nah, they needed craftsmen, delivery drivers, scribes to keep track of every single little thing and scribes to keep track of those scribes and–

Shit was everywhere. People were everywhere. It was so fucking loud.

He had kind of missed it.

Shang Qinghua sits down with a heavy sigh and spares a moment to simply stare out the window.

The sun is approaching lunch time; it shines down onto the world, highlighting how there is still the bright white of snow clinging to each and every peak like a distressed maiden, even as the sun ruthlessly microwaves it into melting.

Ugh. Soon, there was going to be mud fucking *everywhere.*

Shang Qinghua sighs and looks down at the scroll in his hands. It looks so simple, so nice and normal. A list of the disciples that joined nearly a year ago, there to ensure An Ding Peak knows how much to get for each peak that the damn bastards are too lazy to fix themselves.

He has spent a year avoiding his sect because of this damn scroll. Specifically because of the name he knows he will find under Qing Jing Peak; Luo Binghe, his precious son.

Who by now should have spent a year getting slamdunked with whump.

Which was *also* why Shang Qinghua had avoided it. Writing whump is a lot of fun until the characters are real; until he has to make sure he doesn't disrupt the storyline just by trying to make things a little *easier* for the protagonist for his own future gain.

He had entertained the idea of snatching Luo Binghe for himself. To let the boy become a pack mule instead of a vengeful demon lord, or at least avoid the torture of having Shen Qingqiu as his Shizun. But the System had deducted one fucking point every single time he even *considered it* and so, for his own health and happiness, Shang Qinghua had made the decision to just not be at the sect for a year.

It wasn't that uncommon. Being the spy of Mobei-Jun often had him sneaking away on long business trips, and Shang Qinghua had made damn sure that An Ding Peak could survive shit when he wasn't there.

It was a well oiled machine, bro!

Shang Qinghua unrolls the scroll.

Instead of there being one name, there are two.

"... who the fuck is Shen Yuan?"

Shen Yuan, it turns out, is known all over the mountain.

The tiny clone of Shen Qingqiu, rumored to be his son (HAHAHA as *if!!!)* and often mentioned by Yue Qingyuan to any who would listen. Always glued to the protagonist's side and apparently a hater of all furniture and doors for he has broken several in like. Two weeks. Suffering from bullying and a terrible haircut, the boy has had several minor qi deviations that resulted in the exploding of all things around him. Hence the hatred for doors and furniture. Gossip is great. Cultivators love gossip.

Most notably, there is no mention of Luo Binghe whump. Not a single person is whispering about how evil and awful Shen Qingqiu is to that poor little boy, how they are happy that *they* aren't assigned to Qing Jing Peak.

Shang Qinghua's son has been fucking robbed.

The character development! The suffering of a sweet child that will one day twist him into a dark stallion! It's all fucking *gone,* stolen by some random bastard child that Shang Qinghua *never wrote about.*

Un-fucking-believeable.

See, this is why there should only be one transmigrator in these things. Too many isekai nerds and you fuck up the story, the foundation of it! Because obviously Shen Yuan has to be like Shang Qinghua, of that there is no doubt.

He doesn't know whether he should laugh or cry.

Another one like him! Who stole his golden son's whump, the hurt/comfort he was supposed to receive from his childhood sweetheart Ning Yingying- all of it has been *snatched.* But also, a modern man! Or boy, being all of twelve or maybe thirteen years old, but Shang Qinghua prays to the heavens above that Shen Yuan is not an actual fucking child in there.

He doesn't want to find out that pre-teens read his porn.

And to make sure that isn't the case, all he has to do is visit Qing Jing Peak. A simple task- he is the Shidi of Shen Qingqiu, he shouldn't be scared of the Ice Queen living it up, beating kids and refusing to go to therapy. Shang Qinghua isn't a kid. He's a full grown man.

"I created all of you," Shang Qinghua whispers to himself as he walks the rainbow bridge a week later. He plays with the tassel of his sword, makes the little charm on it spin and pretends he's all alone and not passing by several fellow sect members who in turn pretends he's not muttering weird shit under his breath, "I'm not scared. I'm so cool. Cool as a cucumber. I can fucking do this. Shen Qingqiu who? Bah! I created him, too. He has no power over me."

Never mind that he is walking instead of flying. Never mind that it gives him more time to have a complete freakout. It's fine! He's god!

Shang Qinghua does not sweat when he sees the bamboo forest begin to tower in the distance. His steps do not falter as he leaves the bridge and instead touches the gray stone of Qing Jing Peak.

He looks around. Green and white robes swish as people walk by. There is the sound of music in the distance, beautiful and harmonic with only the occasional discordant *twang* from a disciple fucking up.
Qing Jing Peak smells fresh and cold. Those of the peak keep their voices low and calm, ever so mindful of not disturbing their fellow scholars. It is so peaceful. So elegant.

Shang Qinghua takes it all in.

"I'm going to fucking die," he says.

It is a bright and sunny day. The snow sparkles all around them as they walk, and Shen Yuan wishes he had never braided Luo Binghe's hair where Ning Yingying could see.

He wishes he didn't even know what hair *was.*

“Please, please braid my hair? Please?” Ning Yingying begs, bouncing down the stairs in a truly horrifying way. Perhaps it is her role as a future wife that prevents her from slipping on the ice; all Shen Yuan knows is that life is unfair and that Binghe has had to save him from slipping five times in the past hour.

“This one thinks Shijie is good at braiding by herself now,” he says, side-eyeing a patch of ice that she just, what? Ignored? He saw her fucking step on it! “And does not need this shidi’s help.”

“But it looks so nice! And it’s unfair, only braiding A-Luo’s hair!” she complains, landing with a big splat on half-melted snow. Shen Yuan ducks behind Luo Binghe to save himself from the splatter of it, and only offers a sheepish smile as an apology.

“This one doesn’t know how to braid,” Luo Binghe says, giving Shen Yuan a quick poke in retaliation and nothing more, “and is very grateful that Yuan helps.”

“Selfish,” Ning Yingying huffs, “A-Luo is hoarding A-Yuan! Share!”

“Wha- who is hoarding *who!”* Shen Yuan splutters, feeling his face heat, “Really! Shijie, I’m, this one is! That is-” And he blinks, looking past her, “a Peak Lord?”

“Where?” Ning Yingying whirls around to stare.

But there is, indeed, a Peak Lord.

Dressed in winter robes of soft blue, with brown and white peeking through what it does not cover, the man stands out of the way, looking around. His brown hair is tied into a topknot and decorated with a simple crown. In general he looks a bit more simple and practical than the other Peak Lords which Shen Yuan has seen so far. His hair is a bit messier, for one, as if he didn’t bother to check in a mirror before he left home.

Still handsome, of course. It *is* after all *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* But he is shorter than the others, even shorter than Mu Qingfang who had seemed short indeed when standing next to Shen Qingqiu. This guy looks even smaller, too, with how there is nervous energy in his every movement as he shifts on his feet.

“Oh! Shang-shishu,” Ning Yingying says and waves her arms, jumping and splattering more half-melted snow. Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe hurry to get out of the danger zone and nearly break their necks on another patch of ice as a result, “Shishu! Shishu! Hi!”

Shang Qinghua looks at her; and then his eyes land on Shen Yuan.

He stares in such a way that Shen Yuan remembers Liu Qingge, how the man had marched over and just fucking *scruffed* him like a disobeying kitten before he kicked Luo Binghe in the *face.* Shen Yuan stiffens and tugs at the hat still hiding his bad haircut, because it’s been three days and he can’t- he can’t decide if he wants Shen Qingqiu to grow it back or not and then–

The future traitor Shang Qinghua hurries towards them.

“Not again,” Shen Yuan hisses and hides behind Luo Binghe once more, because Shang Qinghua is beelining for him specifically, and now he has a goddamn talisman hiding between his shoulders, alright, he does *not* want to risk losing it because some bastard Lord decided to give him a good shake.

Luo Binghe, being the best friend ever, stands up straight and lets Shen Yuan hide. Not that it’s much of a hiding place, of course. Shang Qinghua clearly knows he is there.

They watch as he neatly sidesteps people and puddles, nearly slamming into a comically large guqin carried by an oblivious old master before, finally, he stands before them. His eyes are wild around the edges.

“Hello, Shizhi,” the man says, giving Ning Yingying a quick smile, before his brown eyes lock onto Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe. He takes them in, eyes quick in a way that says he is taking notes of what he sees. Combining it with how wild and wide they are, he comes off as a touch unhinged. Shen Yuan clutches at the back of Binghe’s robes.

“What’s Shishu doing here?” Ning Yingying asks, bouncing forward, tugging at a blue sleeve, “Shizun says you’re always busy doing menial labor and shouldn’t be spoken to! Is Shishu done doing menial labor?”

“Haha,” Shang Qinghua laughs falsely, “yes indeed! Anyway, this Lord must borrow a Shizhi from Qing Jing! Who would like to volunteer?”

Ning Yingying lights up.

“Excellent! Shen Yuan, come along,” Shang Qinghua says before Ning Yingying can get a single word out. Shen Yuan squawks as he is yanked away from behind Luo Binghe, and then *squeaks* when Luo Binghe latches onto him with a panicked yelp. They all freeze, staring at each other.

Shang Qinghua laughs again. It sounds very nervous.

“Haha, let go of him,” he says, eyes darting all about, “this one only needs to borrow Shizhi for a short while, and this one is certain you two have other duties to attend to!”

They all know that they can’t say no. Shang Qinghua is a Peak Lord, their Shishu and an adult. There should be no danger, and honestly Shen Yuan can’t remember the guy ever being mentioned as actually evil in the original even if he is acting super fucking suspicious.

He was still a treacherous rat who sold everyone out, only to get brutally murdered when he stopped being useful. But that is *years* into the future.

Still, Shen Yuan opens his mouth to protest.

“I need to talk about airplanes,” Shang Qinghua says, making direct eye-contact, and Shen

Yuan's mouth snaps closed, his eyes widening, "and this one is *sure* that Shen-shizhi is the disciple this one needs. Hm?"

Shang Qinghua gives him a little shake.

"... yeah," Shen Yuan gets out, feeling quite faint, "t-this shizhi would be honored."

"See? No problem! Let's go," and Shang Qinghua yanks him free from a confused Luo Binghe, ignores the puffed up cheeks of an indignant Ning Yingying and proceeds to drag Shen Yuan away.

"Yuan!" Luo Binghe says, looking like he is about to give chase.

Shen Yuan barely manages to send him a reassuring smile before they are out of sight, the tall snow drifts hiding Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying from view. Shang Qinghua lets go, clearly sure that Shen Yuan will follow.

Which he does, of course.

Airplane.

The word feels rusty. Unused and gone, something he has thought about but not voiced out loud for years. Has he *ever* said it where others could hear? He stares at the back of Shang Qinghua, mind catching on odd details. In the story, An Ding had brown uniforms with orange and gold stitches. But Shang Qinghua's winter robe is blue with fluffy fur around the neck. It looks warm.

"Alright," Shang Qinghua says and gestures Shen Yuan into a storage room. Shelves are piled high with art supplies, barely visible as Shang Qinghua closes the door and slaps a light talisman onto the wall.

"This is so fucking sus," Shen Yuan says and sits down. Right on the floor. Because his knees died, alright, his kneecaps turned into jelly and wobbled away before he could catch them.

"Hey, don't tell anyone and it doesn't have to be," Shang Qinghua says, as if that doesn't make it even *worse.* The man crouches. "So. Shen Yuan, huh? What the fuck is up with that?"

"What's wrong with my name?" he protests, leaning away, "who *are* you? How did you know-?"

"Do you really have to ask? Dude, you fucking stole my son's spotlight!" Shang Qinghua says and pokes at Shen Yuan's hat, ignores Shen Yuan's flinch as he keeps talking, "all anyone is talking about is you! Bastard son of Shen Qingqiu? Hello? How could I *not* know what you are, when you're not supposed to be here? I never wrote about you!"

What.

"WHAT!" Shen Yuan shrieks and kicks out, nailing Shang Qinghua in the chin. The man makes a sound like a dying balloon and falls sideways, rattling the shelves. He groans and clutches at his head, and then at his chin as well. He whines like a kicked dog.

Shen Yuan does not give a fuck.

"What the fuck does that *mean,* are you saying you're the author? This is all your fault! How was Shen Qingqiu's fucking *bastard son* never brought up!?"

"Ow, fuck, stop kicking me!" Shang Qinghua protests and feebly kicks back, "you're feral! What the hell! Calm down, respect your elders! And there isn't one! Fuck!" he catches Shen Yuan's foot and sits up, bringing it with him. Shen Yuan yelps and falls back as Shang Qinghua refuses to let go of him, clearly realizing he will keep kicking if he does, "there isn't a son! How else would I know you're like me!?"

Shen Yuan stops.

"There isn't?"

"Yeah, bro. You're not even an NPC."

"Shen Qingqiu was telling the truth? When he said he isn't my dad?"

Shang Qinghua stares down at him.

"Dude."

Shen Yuan frowns and yanks his foot free. He scoots away until his back hits the wall. Somewhere during the scuffle, the hat had fallen off. Shen Yuan tugs it back on and makes sure to tug it down to cover his ears, too, just to be safe.

"Dude," Shang Qinghua says again.

"What!" Shen Yuan snaps.

"You actually sat down and spoke with him? And didn't die?"

"It was a close call," Shen Yuan says, thinking back to how Shen Qingqiu just that morning had looked at him and Luo Binghe in a way that implied he was considering skinning them alive for daring to talk on their way out of the house. Shen Qingqiu doesn't seem to be a morning person.

"Have you softened my villain as well? Ugh," and Shang Qinghua leans back, rubbing at his chin. Shen Yuan hopes it bruises. Not that it will, of course. The man is a cultivator, possibly even an Immortal. He can just charge up his golden core and speed up the healing like a cheater.

Airplane Shooting Towards The Sky is *Immortal.*

Shen Yuan stares.

“But who are you?” Shang Qinghua asks, picking up a brush that had fallen to the floor in their scuffle. He twirls it between his fingers, reminding Shen Yuan of the distant memory of ballpoint pens. “Come on, you must have an ID I can call you by, right? Shen Yuan isn’t your *real* name. Or, well, I guess it is if you were reincarnated like I was…”

“I was Shen Yuan back- back then, too,” he says, and now when he is calming down, it’s, well. It’s a lot. Aren’t things supposed to calm down after a big climax? Zhao De is done and over with, Shen Yuan said awful things to Shen Qingqiu that he has yet to properly apologize for, but after all of that things should be *calm,* right?

And instead another wrench is thrown at him.

Well, he isn’t the main character. Maybe that’s why.

“Your name was Shen Yuan and now you’re a itty bitty copy of Shen Qingqiu? Now *that* is sus, bro.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, because it sure fucking is, “you do know that Ning-shijie is going to go and tell him you grabbed me, right?”

“I will be gone before that,” Shang Qinghua says, sweating, “c’mon, tell me your ID already! Are you Warrior’s Hammer? Sha Hualing’s Little Bell?”

“Wha- ew! No! I’m Peerless Cucumber, you hack!” he hisses. *Sha Hualing’s Little Bell???* He has no clue who that is, but it’s easy to guess what kind of reader *that* person was.

“Peerless Cucumber?” Shang Qinghua thinks for a moment, “I vaguely remember you. Weren’t you, like, especially vicious about Shen Qingqiu? Demanding castration… haha, and now you’re his clone.”

“There are differences! We are not *identical!”*

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Shang Qinghua says, “look, I’m just confused, bro. I know what *my* role is! But you’re a goddamn OC, and you absolutely ruined Bingge’s backstory! How is he going to rule the world if he isn’t angry as fuck? Where’s the vengeance going to come from?”

That was a good question.

“I’m not going to let Binghe be *abused* when I can do something about it!?” Shen Yuan squawks instead, “you were just- you were just going to let Shen Qingqiu beat him? What the fuck!”

“Of course I was!” Shang Qinghua throws his hands in the air and drops the brush in the process. It nails him in the eye. *Justice,* Shen Yuan thinks viciously. “Agh! Ugh,” Shang

Qinghua groans and rubs at his eye as he continues, “the System wouldn’t let me do otherwise. Wait. You have a System, right? You’re not a Gary Stu who just skipped that part?”

“I have a System, but it said nothing about letting Binghe be beaten up,” he hisses.

“Mine does,” Shang Qinghua whines, “don’t look at me like that! I’m your Shishu, dude. Be nice. The System is a big bully. Maybe yours is just nicer since you’re a goddamn self-insert.”

“What are we even doing?” Shen Yuan asks, “did you drag me in here just to confirm your suspicions?”

“Well, yeah, but–”

The door slams open. Shang Qinghua and Shen Yuan both shriek, and Shen Yuan is tempted to do it again when he sees Shen Qingqiu glowering at them from the doorway. The light frames him like a holy warrior, there to strike them down for their wrongdoings. His eyes blaze with fury.

Shen Yuan tugs his hat further down and leans back.

“Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu says.

He doesn’t need to say anything else; Shang Qinghua leaps to his feet, looking like he wants to be anywhere but there. Shen Yuan slowly stands up as well, wondering if he is also in trouble. Behind Shen Qingqiu, he can see Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying trying to peek around Shen Qingqiu and into the room.

“Shixiong,” Shang Qinghua greets, rubbing at his neck, offering a smile that only makes him look even guiltier, “hello! It’s been so long, hasn’t it? Time sure flies! A whole year, this shidi only wished to speak with your new disciples! There was no cause to rush so, haha! This shidi was going to visit shixiong directly after, mhm!”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrow.

“Shen Yuan,” he says, not looking away from the An Ding Peak Lord, “you are currently neglecting your duties. This master does not tolerate laziness. *Leave.”*

Shen Yuan’s chores are all still being handled by Cui Wenyan.

“Yes, Shizun!” He says anyway and ignores Shang Qinghua’s pleading eyes, knowing he may very well be dooming his fellow transmigrator to an early death but, well. Shen Yuan *is* only thirteen and still on some weird, awkward ice with Shen Qingqiu that he doesn’t really want to disturb. Besides, what could he do? He is thirteen!

Instead he focuses on getting out without touching either of the men, which in turn requires some insane flexibility on his part. By the time he manages to get outside- Shen Qingqiu

having moved about as much as a fucking rock to make it more difficult- Shen Yuan is immediately grabbed by Luo Binghe and tugged away from the storage room.

“Are you alright?” Luo Binghe frets, holding him at arm's length to look him over. Ning Yingying seems more inclined to go back and listen in on their Shizun, but a gesture from Shen Qingqiu stops her from approaching. Instead, Ning Yingying pouts.

Shen Yuan is curious too; from where they are standing, they can still hear Shen Qingqiu speak. His voice is low and dangerous, but they are just far away enough that he can’t make out the words.

“I’m fine,” he reassures Binghe, catching his hands, “Shang-shishu only wished to ask… things.”

“Things?”

“Confusing things,” Shen Yuan says, which is *technically* not a lie. He doesn’t want to think about how he might have ruined Binghe’s future dark stallion arc, nor the realization that Shen Qingqiu may very well avoid a life of torture and horror. Shen Yuan doesn’t have the energy to think about all of *that,* or everything he feels about it and how it might affect the future. “Binghe didn’t need to tell Shizun. This one was fine, truly.”

“A strange man dragged you away and you expect me to just sit and wait?” Luo Binghe says, incredulous. “No, Yuan!”

“That’s our Shishu,” Shen Yuan says and doesn’t add the *dude* he suddenly wants to throw in there. Fuck! What if he starts using modern slang again? He can’t let that happen. Shit! “He’s… trustworthy. I think.”

Luo Binghe grumbles.

“This master,” Shen Qingqiu says, voice raised louder for their ears, “believes he told disciple Shen to stop neglecting his duties.” He says it in the tone of *Fuck off!* Or possibly *Scram!* If this world was more child friendly and less into swearing.

Ning Yingying, Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan fucks off.

Later, Shen Yuan sees Shang Qinghua beat a hasty retreat into the sky on his sword, swooping away like he is being chased by death itself.

At least he survived, he thinks, and goes back to sweeping the stone paths free of snow and

ignores the way Luo Binghe sends a suspicious glare towards the fleeing Lord of An Ding Peak.

Shen Yuan hasn't told Luo Binghe about the hair.

The fact that Shen Qingqiu has said he can grow it back now. He had later explained, not looking at Shen Yuan as he did, that he could do so by touching Shen Yuan's scalp and pouring his qi into the area to speed up the growth. That it was a simple process and not painful and that he would give Shen Yuan some days to think about it.

There are a few reasons why Shen Yuan hasn't said yes yet, just like there are reasons he hasn't told Binghe about it.

One of them is quite simple.

He doesn't want Shen Qingqiu to touch his hair.

It feels stupid putting it like that. After all, since that first night of Luo Binghe being allowed to sleep over, Shen Qingqiu has spent every evening calming down Shen Yuan's meridians. It has become a familiar process- though still cold and uncomfortable- and it is a far more invasive thing than growing his *hair* out.

But he hasn't even let Binghe touch his hair. He doesn't mind as much if Luo Binghe looks at the brand on his neck, to make sure it is slowly fading but still visible without the talisman. But the hair is this weird thing that Shen Yuan just can't let go of, and then when he tries to imagine Shen Qingqiu touching it for a longer time…

Nope!

Nope, it feels very bad! Nope!!!

Of course he *wants* to have long hair again. Less staring would be nice, and he wouldn't have to be so damn paranoid about his stupid neck. Long hair is a good thing in this world, he knows how precious it is. And he likes xianxia stories for a reason, alright? Long hair looks badass!

Sure, it's a bit bothersome sometimes, but. Well. Mostly it's cool.

Another reason is that it feels weird to ask Shen Qingqiu to do something nice when the dude is already acting weird.

Ever since Shen Yuan yelled *that* at the man, he has been looking at Shen Yuan in a certain way. Not always, and not when Shen Yuan is supposed to notice. But he does notice, obviously. Who wouldn't notice the Scum villain staring a hole at him?

He is pretty sure there's anger and disgust. Shen Yuan is kind of sure that he knows how to see it on Shen Qingqiu after all this time of staring at him and keeping track of all the man's weird quirks. Anger and disgust for *sure.* But it makes no sense, because Shen Qingqiu still lets Shen Yuan sleep in the side room and he still lets Luo Binghe spend the nights.

And maybe it's not *only* anger and disgust. Maybe there is something more, an emotion that Shen Yuan can't figure out. It puts him on edge.

But either way, all it means is that it feels real weird and awkward as fuck to not only *not* have given Shen Qingqiu a proper apology for *that* but to then also go and beg the dude to fix his hair.

Easy solution would of course be to say sorry.

But how the fuck does he *do that!!!!*

Shen Qingqiu clearly took something from the bullshit Shen Yuan yelled at him, but Shen Yuan doesn't know what. He isn't supposed to know anything about the man's past or future! How does he apologize for something that he shouldn't have been able to ever say without coming off as more sus than goddamn Airplane?

Binghe could probably help, or at least lend a listening ear. But Shen Yuan wouldn't make any sense, might reveal more than he should and then the stupid System might pull some bullshit in return.

Binghe would tell him to get his hair back, though. The other boy always looks so sad when he looks at how short and choppy Shen Yuan's hair is. That alone is enough motivation to want it all back, too.

Ugh.

Why must shit be so fucking complicated.

"Sit," Shen Qingqiu says later that evening, and Shen Yuan sits down on the carpet, as has become the norm for these evenings.

Luo Binghe has yet to arrive; it is too early for him yet, and Shen Yuan feels a little guilty

about it. Shen Qingqiu truly allows nothing more than sleep. More than once poor Binghe had to wait outside as Shen Qingqiu finished calming Shen Yuan's meridians, refusing to let the boy in before it was time for bed. They have to fucking *whisper* if they want to talk in bed, too, because Shen Qingqiu is a bitch.

But *this* has become routine. Shen Yuan expects Shen Qingqiu to sit down behind him. He is prepared for the man's hands to settle against his back, and he only twitches once as Shen Qingqiu begins, the rush of qi cold as always, like touching snow without gloves before it melts against his skin.

The routine is broken when Shen Qingqiu speaks.

"What did Shang Qinghua want?" he asks.

His voice is low and intent. Shen Yuan tenses and stares down at the carpet. It is fluffy and soft, possibly some kind of fur of a monster he doesn't know the name of.

"Shishu? Um, he just- he asked a few things."

"Specify."

"He… wondered who I was," Shen Yuan says, because that was close enough to the truth. The way Shen Qingqiu speaks makes him want to hunch, to shrink and put distance. But he can't. Not with Shen Qingqiu's hands on his back.

"In relation to this one?" Shen Qingqiu asks, qi stuttering, and Shen Yuan grimaces at the feel of it. "You should not speak to him again," Shen Qingqiu adds.

Shen Yuan bites his lip.

He can't really promise that, can he? Because even if Airplane had been sus as fuck, had made things difficult- it was still Airplane. Still someone that Shen Yuan could talk with about everything else. Someone he could possibly compare notes with in the future, if things went wrong and the System fucked up as it always did. And Airplane was a *Peak Lord.* Who knew shit. That was huge, and something Shen Yuan needed to take advantage of, somehow.

"Shen Yuan," the man behind him says, clearly noticing his hesitation. "This one will remind you that your reputation affects mine, and mine affects yours. Do not trust a man like Shang Qinghua."

"Isn't he my Shishu? Your shidi?" Shen Yuan points out, glancing towards the window. There is no Luo Binghe yet. It is still early. Shen Yuan prays for a knock to interrupt.

"That means nothing," Shen Qingqiu says, low and furious, so certain. The guy was always paranoid in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* This time, though, Shen Yuan can't really blame him.

He wonders if Airplane still plans to betray Cang Qiong Mountain.

“People will use any weakness they see,” Shen Qingqiu continues, “which is why you should make a decision now.”

“... decision?”

“Your hair,” Shen Qingqiu says, removing his hands, and Shen Yuan’s heart stutters in his chest, “you need to regrow it. It is a shame to you and as such it will be used as a shame against *me.* It is a quick process. I do not understand why you are dragging it out.”

Well, fuck.

“I thought it would be *my* decision.”

“Are you claiming you want to look like this? Truly?” Shen Qingqiu asks, sarcasm dripping from his voice, “even your *little friend* would agree with me when I say you are being ridiculous.”

He’s probably right. No, he *is* right. Shen Yuan does want his hair back and he knows that Luo Binghe wants it back, too, and he knows he’s being dumb about it all.

Doesn’t stop him from wanting to dig his heels in, though. From scowling, his nervous jitters quickly turning into annoyance.

“Fine,” he snaps, “why not! Have it *your* way. Grow my stupid hair back. Or maybe it’s *your* hair! Maybe I’m just borrowing it, like I’m borrowing your stupid face!”

“Shen Yuan. Be. Respectful.”

“This one is sorry, *Shizun,”* Shen Yuan hisses back even as he shrinks into himself, curling up and furious, as if doing so will contain it, make himself calm down, make Shen Qingqiu less fucking mad. “This disciple won’t insult *your* face anymore. Please, do grow *your* hair back.”

The fire crackles in the silence that follows. Shen Yuan can’t relax; his muscles strain with tension, and he bites at his lip until he thinks it might bleed.

Finally, Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

“Every time I think you have no spine,” he mutters. There is the sound of fabric rustling as Shen Qingqiu stands up, as the man walks towards the kitchen to brew his evening tea. “You need to learn where to aim your bite, child, before this master loses patience,” he says, like a threat as the clinking of porcelain can be heard.

Patience. That’s rich.

“This one wasn’t biting,” he still says, a weak defense. Slowly, Shen Yuan lets himself relax. He twists around to look at the Scum villain in his kitchen, fussing over tea that only he will drink. He is glaring furiously at his shelf of tea leaves, perhaps considering if any of them can

work as poison for unruly disciples.

“Ah, true,” Shen Qingqiu says, the sarcasm back, the judgment always needling at Shen Yuan with tiny pinpricks, “you do take *that* literally.” Before Shen Yuan can bristle and snap a reply, the man continues, “we will grow your hair back in the morning or not at all. This master does not intend to wait on his own disciple to make the obvious decision.”

Luo Binghe knocks on the door and Shen Yuan wants to fucking *bite* a bitch. He doesn’t, of course. He knows Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t let him close enough.

And obviously he would never bite Binghe.

“Shizun can grow my hair back,” he whispers to Binghe under the covers. He feels a little bad about it; Luo Binghe was almost asleep, but the words make him sit up so fast that Shen Yuan swears he hears his teeth click together.

“Really!?”

“Ssssh,” Shen Yuan hisses and yanks him back down, then nearly dies when Binghe’s elbow lands in his gut.

“Sorry, sorry,” Luo Binghe whispers, and they both awkwardly shuffle until they are back to being comfortable. They lay in silence for a moment, waiting for Shen Qingqiu to tell them off for breathing too loudly. When he remains absent, Luo Binghe turns to look at him again.

“But he can? Truly?” Binghe frowns, “Why didn’t he do it *before?”*

“Shizun gave me a choice, it was- it was to make sure Zhao De couldn’t come back,” Shen Yuan explains, half-wishing he had brought the hat to bed. He is far too aware of how his hair stands up now, messy from the quick shuffle, from laying flat for just long enough to shape itself after his pillow. “But he… he said he could still do it, now.”

“That’s… *nice* of him,” Luo Binghe says.

Shen Yuan smiles at him, amused at how the protagonist sounds like he is being forced to confess a great sin. Silly Binghe.

“Mn,” Shen Yuan says, and then, “do you… do you think I should?”

Luo Binghe blinks at him. They are so close like this, legs tangled, the bed just small enough

that two pre-teens can barely fit in it. There *is* a second bed but on the other side of the room but, well. They don't want to risk it when it would mean Binghe ends up in the dorms again.

"You're asking if you should… grow your hair out?" Binghe slowly asks.

"Yeah. It's- I should, I know I should," Shen Yuan looks away from the star dark eyes, cheeks burning, "it's silly to *not* say yes. But- but it's just- I don't know. He has to… he said he would have to… t-touch. The hair. And… and it would only be for a bit, but... and I *want* to b-but he would h-have to…"

"Oh," Luo Binghe mumbles, and then he is tugging Shen Yuan close. He lets him, of course. It would be dumb to say no to a hug from *Binghe.* Like the protagonist he is, he gives the best hugs.

Not that Shen Yuan has let anyone else hug him. Ning Yingying's doesn't count, they are more like strangling attempts and jumpscares.

Shen Yuan hides his face against Binghe's shoulder and hugs back.

"I'm being *stupid,"* he says.

"Yuan is never stupid," Luo Binghe denies, and ugh, Shen Yuan's eyes are burning. He's *not* going to cry. He's not! "I'll be there. I'll hold your hand and stab him if he does anything."

Shen Yuan hiccups a laugh.

"You can't stab Shizun," he protests, clutching at the back of Binghe's night robes, "then he will stab *you* and I'm not as good with the sword as you are. I wouldn't be able to stab him back."

"You can blast him away instead," Luo Binghe reassures him, "didn't Mu-shishu say you had really strong blasts? You could make him fly all the way down to the bottom of the mountain, I'm sure of it."

Shen Yuan giggles and feels how Binghe squeezes his arms around him, feeling the curve of a smile against his hair.

"Thank you," he mumbles, "you're… you're the best friend one could have, Binghe."

"Only for Yuan," Luo Binghe whispers back.

Shen Yuan kneels on the carpet, head held high and once Luo Binghe kneels facing him, holding his hands, Shen Yuan takes a deep breath.

“This one is ready, Shizun!” he says far too loudly.

Shen Qingqiu, who sits by his desk holding a cup of tea, slowly blinks at them both. It is the slow blink of a confused and lazy cat, someone who has so many better things to do than *think* this early in the morning.

Shen Yuan bites his lip and tries to smile through the growing anxiety. Luo Binghe smiles at him reassuringly, squeezing his hands. Shen Yuan dares to glance at Shen Qingqiu. The man looks back. Shen Qingqiu looks at Luo Binghe with narrowed eyes, before he puts down his cup of tea and stands.

“Disciple Shen made the right decision? A rarity,” Shen Qingqiu says, and this time Shen Yuan is the one to squeeze Binghe’s hands as his friend frowns furiously.

“This master shall touch your head now,” Shen Qingqiu says, suddenly far too close and *fuck,* nevermind, Shen Yuan isn’t ready, he can’t fucking do this, nausea thick in his throat as he tries to yank his hands free but Binghe won’t let go, just like he promised before they left their bedroom but *fuck,* he can’t he can’t, he’s going to throw up–!

Shen Qingqiu places his hand on top of Shen Yuan’s head.

He gasps; not out of fear or terror or any such thing. Instead it is out of pure fucking surprise as he feels like someone poured cold water over his head, a surreal experience when he still feels perfectly dry. It spreads and does not leave the top of his head.

Shen Yuan shivers and tries to focus. He is vaguely aware of his nails digging into Luo Binghe’s hands, but it’s so far off he can’t pay attention to it. Shen Qingqiu’s hand is cold. His qi, as always, is freezing.

Shen Yuan feels it moving in such a strange, alien way. Like drops of ice water spreading across his scalp, shifting in a way that isn’t even uncomfortable. It’s just so weird, so *new* that he can’t be bothered to muster up any of the nauseating horror from before.

He blinks at Luo Binghe.

Binghe blinks back, eyes briefly glancing towards the man behind Shen Yuan, before he focuses back on Shen Yuan. He smiles again. Slowly, Shen Yuan manages to loosen his grip enough that his nails no longer dig crescent marks into poor Binghe’s skin.

Shen Yuan blinks, and his hair moves. He can *feel* it move but not grow; just the feeling of his hair beginning to travel downwards in a slow, smooth slide. As if he had tied it up and is only now letting it free, and it grows and grows.

Black at the corner of his eyes as his bangs grow longer. He blinks as his hair suddenly

covers his vision and keeps going. He doesn't dare to let go of Binghe, though, to tuck it away. So he sits there and can only barely see how Luo Binghe's eyes grow wide as Shen Yuan's hair grows longer and longer, falling past his shoulders and down his back.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity and a mere blink of an eye, Shen Qingqiu moves his hand away.

"There," the man says, moving back towards his desk, "as this master told you before. *Simple."*

Slowly, Shen Yuan lets go of Luo Binghe's hands.

He sweeps his hair out of his face. He sweeps it outwards again and stares at the long, ink black tresses falling from hand in silky strands.

"Oh," Shen Yuan breathes, and combs his fingers through his hair, "oh!" he repeats, and Shen Yuan can feel his cheeks grow warm but- but it's just–

His cheeks hurt from how wide he smiles at Luo Binghe. Binghe smiles back in that helpless kind of way, fingers twitching in his lap.

"Don't walk out without tying it," Shen Qingqiu scoffs, "if disciple Shen can remember how to do such a thing." And Shen Yuan turns his smile towards the man by the desk, who is pointedly refusing to look back.

"Thank you, Shizun," he says, giddy, and Shen Qingqiu doesn't reply.

Instead he drinks his tea.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ, paranoid: did he corner SY to get dirt on me wtf wtf I'll kill both of them, SY is too trusting, he will sell me out by accident like the idiot he is-
LBH: omg SQH kidnapped my precious Yuan and he might be doing UNSPEAKABLE THINGS to him!!! AHHHHHH
NYY: it's so unfair that SQH didn't take ME with him on his super secret thing! :((SY didn't even try to raise his hand! I did!!!!!!!! UNFAIR!
Meanwhile in storage:
Airplane and Cucumber: *kicking the shit out of each other, screaming*

TIMESKIP TIME!!!!!!!!!!!
next chapter, we will be skipping ahead!
However, next chapter might be a bit late. I will try my best to post it next monday, but it might take two weeks instead of one because... I want to reread vol 1 to make sure I don't fuck up my plot ideas ;A; pls have patience with me!

Anyway, thanks for reading! And please know I read every single comment and I love them, even if I might not always have the time/energy to respond! Just know I adore you and I'm very grateful <3

There's fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I'll skip descriptions for earlier fanarts! Go back to earlier chapter for those pls <3

Chapter 5:
Friendodo

Chapter 6:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia

Chapter 8:
Dolly
Lady Dysnomi

Chapter 9:
Anqelbean

Chapter 10:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia
Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Absolutely adorable art of SY braiding an adoring LBH's hair by Frummpets!
And Anqelbean
drew this adorable moment of SY and LBH reenacting Romeo and Juliet <3
and... this absolutely hilarious comic made by Starry-stan-blog!
which made me laugh so fucking hard holy shit!! Absolutely nailed the vibe!!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a girl digging a hole.

Her brown hair hangs down in two braids, slowly coming undone as she becomes dirtier for each scoop of earth. From where Yue Qingyuan stands, she looks determined, furiously so, with her cheeks all puffed up and face red from strain.

Yue Qingyuan smiles as she startles at the sudden appearance of a boy in green and white robes coming to a sliding stop in front of her. By Yue Qingyuan's side, Shen Qingqiu's lips curl into a smug smile as Qi Qingqi's glare grows more severe.

They watch as Liu Mingyan comes to a stop further away, having lost the race. They watch as Shen Yuan kneels to speak with the little girl, and even from this distance can Yue Qingyuan see his encouraging smile and gesturing hands.

After what appears to be a nod, Shen Yuan takes the girl into his arms and begins to walk back up to the waiting lords. The girl, exhausted, rests her head against his shoulder.

"There was *one* girl," Qi Qingqi says as they watch their disciples trudge back to them, "one! By all rights, she should be going to Xian Shu!"

"And yet, she has chosen Qing Jing," Shen Qingqiu replies, slowly fanning himself. Yue Qingyuan finds himself lingering on how the movement makes Shen Qingqiu's sleeves fall down just enough to reveal a pale wrist, blue veins visible from how close they are standing. "A clever one, indeed. Already she understands quality."

"Your disciple must have lied to her," Qi Qingqi snaps, "he was raised by *you* after all." Shen Qingqiu's hand clenched around his fan, his eyes narrowing in turn as he straightened.

"Having that boy as my disciple for two years does not mean I *raised* him in the manner *shimei* implies. This one does not coddle," he frostily replies.

The rumors of Shen Yuan being his son have not settled since the boy first arrived. It is something which Yue Qingyuan knows that Xiao-Jiu finds annoying. The only thing the man despises more than those rumors appears to be the idea that he might be *nice* because of them. It is a charming trait, for it is clear to all who look that he is, indeed, soft for Shen Yuan and only Shen Yuan.

Not that Yue Qingyuan would ever say such a thing out loud.

(not again, anyway)

Yue Qingyuan hums and decides to step between his sect siblings. It is a nice day and early Spring. He does not wish for the new disciple of Qing Jing Peak to have her first meeting be that of Xiao-Jiu and Qingqi-shimei arguing with sharpened tongues. Or, more likely, both attempting to stab the other with a needle.

“Xiao-Yuan has grown much lately,” he says instead and smiles at Xiao-Jiu, “it is pleasing to see him thrive under Shidi’s guidance.”

Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

“The boy should *stop* growing before we run out of clothes,” he says, which may very well be true. Shen Yuan has left behind the roundness of a child and has instead fully begun to reach the knobbly stage of early teens.

As they watch their disciples approach, Yue Qingyuan sees how the boy’s sleeves are just a little too short to be proper. He has always been on the gangly and skinny side, but now he looks less like an awkward foal and more like a young tree eager to grow tall.

Yue Qingyuan wonders, sometimes, if this is what Xiao-Jiu looked like during those awful years. If, perhaps, Shen Yuan is a chance to see the past in its own way. It is a bittersweet thing to consider.

“Does Qing Jing Peak struggle to provide for their disciples? Shameful,” Qi Qingqi says, breaking Yue Qingyuan from his thoughts. Shen Qingqiu in turn bristles like an angry cat; Yue Qingyuan knows, now, that he will not be able to stop them and withholds a sigh that is more fond than tired as Xiao-Jiu looks like a cat eager to pounce, fan snapping shut.

“Shizun!” Shen Yuan calls, and the tension stutters to a halt as they turn to face their disciples. Liu Mingyan’s veil flutters in the breeze. Her eyes hold no resentment in them despite having lost the impromptu race.

Now that they are closer, Yue Qingyuan sees that the little girl in Xiao-Yuan’s arms has eyes the color of chestnuts. He smiles at her, and is amused to see her blush and hide her face against Shen Yuan’s neck.

“This is Chen Xiaoling,” the boy says, propping her up higher. She is just barely small enough for him to carry without strain. She is dirty and sweaty, but Shen Yuan does not seem to mind that she is staining his uniform as he continues, “she is ten, and is very eager to join Qing Jing.”

Ten is the youngest age they allow. The girl is tiny.

None of them call her out on it.

“And how did she reach that decision?” Qi Qingqi says instead, her tone sharp as Liu Mingyan moves to stand beside her, “what did you tell the girl?”

Shen Yuan offers an innocent smile. His eyes hold a glint of mischief.

“This one told her that Xian Shu Peak only accepts women and no men,” he obediently says, “and that at Qing Jing Peak, she will learn how to read.”

Yue Qingyuan has to turn his head and cough into his hand to disguise his laugh. It is not subtle, and it earns him a glare from Qi Qinqgi, before she turns that same glare towards Shen Yuan.

“We teach our disciples to read!”

“Truly? Well, that is quite alright. This one also told her we had pretty boys *and* girls.” The little girl nods against his shoulder. “It is important to have a good balance,” Shen Yuan adds, to which the girl nods again.

“Enough,” Shen Qingqiu says, though he does not sound as cold as he did moments before, “this master believes it is time for you to help your new shimei with settling into Qing Jing Peak. We shall hold the tea ceremony later.”

“Yes, Shizun,” Shen Yuan obediently says. He bows to them all, making the girl giggle as she is forced to follow with the motion, before he hurries off. Once out of hearing distance, it appears that Chen Xiaoling wishes to walk by herself, though she holds his hand as they continue.

He has grown well.

Yue Qingyuan remembers how timid he used to be nearly two years ago, even with that furious glint in his eyes whenever he felt offended. How often he used to have bruises staining his skin, or that awful period where his hair had been cut by unkind hands.

Now he is confident; less wary, moving as fluid as one can at his age. His ink black hair flows long and freely, with the bare minimum tucked away to leave his face bare.

“There is no sense in us remaining here,” Qi Qingqi complains, “now that you have cheated yourself to the lone possible candidate for *my* peak.”

“It is not cheating when one disciple is faster than the other.”

“It is when we were not informed of there being a *race!”*

“It is not our duty to inform you of there being one,” Shen Qingqiu mockingly replies.

Yue Qingyuan silently agrees; he had certainly not been aware of such a race being a thing. They had all stood there, discussing who showed potential, before Shen Yuan had abruptly begun to run down the mountain. By the time Qi Qingqi and Liu Mingyan had realized *who* his goal was, it had been too late. Still, a win is a win. Perhaps it is the street child in him that sees it as fair and square.

“Perhaps,” he says mildly instead, “there are some who do not yet appear to be female who

may still wish to join."

It was not uncommon, after all, for people to appear different from what they actually were. Qiong Ding Peak had more than one disciple and master who had either drunk tea made of the *Flower Giving Lotus* or eaten the pods of *Vines of Pillar Climbing.*

Of course, that was not the issue.

"Those who showed potential have already been taken by Mu-shidi or Wei-shixiong," Qi Qingqi says, "honestly, why does every peak want disciples this year? And why were there so few girls!"

"This one is done here," Shen Qingqiu says in lieu of answering, snapping his fan shut and turning in a whirl of teal robes, "and shall leave shimei to complain in peace."

"May this shixiong join his shidi?" Yue Qingyuan asks.

Shen Qingqiu stops and glances at him. His eyes narrow into slivers of green, looking him over, before he turns away once more with a frown.

"If shixiong insists," Shen Qingqiu replies.

Yue Qingyuan smiles and takes it as a *yes.*

Shen Yuan stretches his arms above his head as he walks up to their tree. Everything cracks in a satisfying way, and he grins when he hears Luo Binghe's grumble at it. These days they can both hear more than the average person can, which is cool as fuck. Now they can whisper across the classroom at each other, which is very fun if they just ignore the realization that when they were younger, they had been *way* less sneaky than they thought.

It also means that Luo Binghe can hear how Shen Yuan pops his knuckles to make him grumble again. Which he does, of course. Shen Yuan finds it very funny when the protagonist grumbles.

"Why are you dirty?" Luo Binghe asks once Shen Yuan is close enough, lounging on a branch, barely visible among the fresh greenery. The leaves are still a vibrant shade of green, fresh and newly sprouted. There is a basket dangling from a branch, and Shen Yuan eyes it with interest.

"This humble one managed to steal a shimei," he tells Binghe and makes a weak attempt at brushing the dirt off of his uniform. It doesn't work at all. "A-Ying is helping her settle in

now. Shizun had the tea ceremony with those awful leaves that Ming-shixiong brought back from home."

"That does not explain why you are dirty, Yuan," Luo Binghe says and holds out a hand for him to grab. He does so, letting his friend pull him up into the tree.

He doesn't actually need the help, of course. But it's nice.

Shen Yuan hums and smears a dirty finger against Binghe's cheek.

"Our new shimei was very tired from digging, so I carried her," he explains, "and I did not wish to miss the lunch you promised, so here I am. Dirty."

Luo Binge pulls out a handkerchief from his sleeve, grabs Shen Yuan's hands and gently begins to clean them, taking extra care with the finger which Shen Yuan used to smear his cheek with dirt. He does this while maintaining direct eye-contact.

"... you need to learn how to be dirty," Shen Yuan defends himself.

"This shidi apologizes to shixiong for his cleanliness," Luo Binghe says, because he is a bastard and found out a mere week ago that Shen Yuan is the older one of the two of them. He also, of course, quickly realized that Shen Yuan can't fucking stand it.

"Stop that!" Shen Yuan protests, snatching the handkerchief to clean Binghe's cheek with it, "I'm *Yuan* to you."

Luo Binghe smiles, his star bright eyes glittering.

"Of course," he says, "does Yuan want to eat the bao this one made?"

"This dirty one would like that very much- don't push me! I'll fall!"

Early spring at Cang Qiong Mountain was often wet.

Wet and green.

Shen Yuan truly wishes he could describe it better than that. Perhaps that first spring, if he hadn't been too scared of the Scum villain and of how new and tenuous his friendship with Binghe had been. Maybe back then, he could have come up with some kind of good, poetic description of Cang Qiong Mountain in spring.

But early spring means that the snow has only just melted. It means that there is water everywhere, which in turn means there is mud. *Everywhere.* Fresh grass sprouts from it like glittering emerald blades, but they are difficult to appreciate when Shen Yuan knows he will slip on yet another mud puddle the moment he stops looking down as he walks.

Luo Binghe usually helps him avoid the worst of it. His friend has the kind of perception only a protagonist is able to wield, eagle eyed and considerate. He often tugs Shen Yuan to the side before he steps on yet another muddied path. When he is too late to do so he can, at least, catch Shen Yuan before there is a mighty *splat* of mud.

But they are fourteen and there are no longer any bullies to worry about. Shen Yuan has to brave the wet, muddy world by his lonesome when Luo Binghe is called away to do chores somewhere else.

It is truly unfair.

One would think that cultivating would make Shen Yuan less clumsy. At times, he swears he feels elegant. Dressed in the uniform of a proper disciple, white and green, he *swears* he feels like he can walk on top of snow without ever leaving a print behind, as if his very being is lighter than a drifting feather.

And then Shen Yuan steps on a rake and has to use that amazing cultivation to stop his own damn nosebleed, blindly backing away with tears in his eyes.

Which would be easier, if he didn't immediately back into a mud puddle.

Splat!

"FUCK!"

The golden glow of a sunset settles against Qing Jing Peak. The shadows become softer, and Shen Yuan smoothes out his robes and waves off Ning Yingying and a bouncing Chen Xiaoling as he waits by the gray stonestairs which leads away from the dormitories.

He is happy to see that the girls seem to like each other- Ning Yingying is nothing but delighted about having a little shimei, most of the women of Qing Jing Peak being masters in their own right and far older than Ning Yingying.

It must have left her feeling more isolated than he thought. But Chen Xiaoling is a bright little thing, matching Ning Yingying's energy. It's nice. He will probably regret it later, when he has *two* menaces climbing the bookshelves. He can only hope that having a shimei will make Ning Yingying behave just a *little* bit more. Besides, Ming Fan is still the head disciple.

At worst, Shen Yuan can just shove them in his direction.

It is not yet curfew, but Shen Yuan still waits.

He offers nods and bows to those who pass, masters and shixiongs and shijies, and he often receives smiles and nods in turn. Some are on their way to early bed, some to the baths. A few wander by with their noses seemingly stuck to whatever book that has captured their interest because Qing Jing Peak is in the end very much the peak of nerds.

“Did you change your robes?” Luo Binghe asks and Shen Yuan smiles at him, not surprised by his sudden appearance.

“No,” Shen Yuan lies and when Luo Binghe just *looks* at him, Shen Yuan gives his head a pat.

He is taller than the protagonist these days; has even grown taller than Ning Yingying. Shen Yuan doesn’t try to hide how smug it makes him- for a long time, it seemed like he would *never* grow.

And now Luo Binghe has to tilt his head back to meet his eyes.

“Then Yuan must have worked very hard to keep his robes so pristine while doing chores,” Luo Binghe says so sweetly, so innocently, and Shen Yuan huffs at him, cheeks growing warm, and begins to walk instead of replying. Luo Binghe easily falls into step next to him. When they meet Cui Wenyan on the way, Shen Yuan pretends he doesn’t notice how Luo Binghe moves to keep himself in between them.

Cui Wenyan doesn’t greet them. He only shuffles down the stairs, brushing past them, seventeen years old and still no sword of his own. None except the normal ones, the kind that anyone could wield.

Shen Yuan waits until they are out of earshot before he speaks again.

“Do you think we will get our own swords soon?” he asks, even though he knows they won’t. If he remembers correctly, Luo Binghe wasn’t allowed a sword until he was fifteen. There is one more year left, but Shen Yuan can’t help but wonder if maybe, just *maybe,* Shen Qingqiu not actively hating on the protagonist might get them both a sword earlier. Because that would be cool.

He really wants to see Zheng Yang.

Shen Yuan also *really* wants his own sword.

“... I did hear that Shen Qingqiu might be taking some disciples out on a hunt soon?” Luo Binghe says, a furrow in his brow. “But I don’t know if that means we will have swords. Cui Wenyan doesn’t have his own, and he has been on many night hunts now. And his punishment is over.”

“Mn, true. I hope we get to go to Wan Jian together, when it is time.”

“Of course we will,” Luo Binghe says, as if he isn’t way better at sword forms than Shen Yuan. As if there isn’t a *very* noticeable gap between them in such things. He would call it unfair, but he suspects even Shen Qingqiu had to work hard to *git gud* as the gamers say. Though maybe the man wasn’t battling two left feet when *he* was cultivating unlike Shen Yuan who was, in fact, doing exactly that.

“I’m good at talismans, Binghe,” he points out, “and qi stuff. That doesn’t mean I will be able to have a sword at the same time as you.”

“You will,” Luo Binghe stubbornly insists, “Yuan has such good control over leaves, why wouldn’t you be allowed a sword? Cultivators can use them to attack from afar, can we not?”

Shen Yuan should be humble and shy. But he can’t help but puff up, because yeah! Yeah, he *is* good with leaves. He can easily control a hundred of them now, and even Mu Qingfang had said his control was crazy good for his age. Not in those words, obviously, but still! So what if he isn’t a dps powerhouse like Binghe?

Glass cannons are cool too!

“Well, maybe,” he says, and Luo Binghe looks at him with warm eyes and a fond smile, and Shen Yuan pretends the boy doesn’t know he is very badly faking at humility, “but still, I rather one of us has a sword than neither. Especially if Shizun is bringing us out on a mission- not that he has *mentioned* that to me, where did you even hear such a rumor?”

“While this one was helping clean out the food storage, it came up,” Luo Binghe says as they turn down the path which leads to the baths.

Shen Yuan doesn’t need to be the last one to bathe anymore, the brand on his neck barely visible these days, thin, pale lines that one has to look for to see. But it has become a habit.

Besides, having the entire bath for just the two of them is more relaxing.

“Apparently Shen Qingqiu prefers to bring disciples out on such missions around our age,” Luo Binghe adds, holding open the door for him. “Master Su-Tung said that he doesn’t like having soft disciples, and that he is surprised that Shen Qingqiu has yet to take us out on one. He even said that maybe Shen Qingqiu has gone soft himself.”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes and tugs his hair free. Luo Binghe takes the hairpin that held it all together from his hand, putting it beside Binghe’s. They are simple and made of wood and a little bit crude around the edges. Gifted to them by Ning Yingying, made by her and only her.

Shen Yuan’s is carved to look like a fox. Luo Binghe’s is a lotus flower, which the protagonist for some weird reason had *asked* for. It’s a bit girly, but he won’t judge his friend. He knows Luo Binghe will grow up with enough macho energy to keep a harem of three-thousand beauties satisfied, after all.

“Soft,” he mutters instead, because he would hardly claim Shen Qingqiu to be a soft man, nor one to encourage softness. Even Ning Yingying, the few times the man corrected her, was very firmly put back on the path of *don’t be an idiot.* “Shizun *still* doesn’t let you enter the house before curfew. Soft! Honestly. Perhaps there are no night hunts up to his standards and that is why he has yet to take us out on one.”

At least the water is warm.

It is not quite a hot spring- there is no such thing on Qing Jing Peak, though he has heard from Shang Qinghua that An Ding have enough for an entire damn bathhouse- but with the help of talismans and carefully crafted heat stones, the water is always at a comfortable temperature and always clean with the purification seals carved into the very bottom.

Shen Yuan melts into it. Luo Binghe slides into the water a moment later, quick and efficient as he begins to scrub himself down. Shen Yuan decides to be a little bit lazier, and sinks down until his mouth is barely above the surface. He closes his eyes and sighs happily.

“Perhaps he wants a real scary one,” Shen Yuan mumbles, using his fingers to comb through his hair. It’s long, spreading out in the water around him like an inky black fan, “to traumatize us into being obedient. I bet he would have us hunt down a black moon rhinoceros python if Shibo wouldn’t say no.”

“If he does send us after such a beast, this shidi will protect his shixiong,” Luo Binghe promises, voice teasing.

Shen Yuan opens his eyes just so that he can splash water in Binghe’s face.

After they stop being distracted by the war that follows, their limbs heavy and their bodies somehow more soaked than just sitting in the water would have made them, they make their way to the bamboo house.

The windows glow a soft golden-yellow. The evening air is on the cold side, making Shen Yuan shiver as they walk, hair cold and wet and clinging to his skin. At least his isn’t as heavy as Binghe’s thick curls. At least, if he used qi to dry his hair, it would look like it always does.

Luo Binghe’s would *poof* in a way that the protagonist hates.

However, since they took longer than expected, it means his hair is more wet than usual as well. They hadn’t had time to truly use a towel for it. With the cold air and the possibility of Luo Binghe being forced to wait outside for however long Shen Qingqiu deems it, well. He doesn’t want Binghe to get sick. So…

“Window?” Shen Yuan asks.

“Window,” Binghe nods. He gives Shen Yuan’s hand a squeeze before he walks around the corner. Shen Yuan instead enters through the door because Shen Qingqiu is a weird fucking

man.

“This one greets Shizun,” he says and tugs his boots off by the door.

“Mn,” Shen Qingqiu replies, drinking tea. He is kneeling by the table, crown put aside but hair still tied up. There is one more teacup waiting. It is dark blue; Shen Yuan knows that it is from a tea set which Yue Qingyuan gifted his Shizun.

He also knows better than to point that out.

They both pretend they don’t hear the sound of a firecracker going off from the side-room. Shen Qingqiu, not tactful, nevertheless fakes it well in favor of pretending there aren't *two* teenage boys in his home. “Sit down.”

Shen Yuan sits down and pours himself some tea.

He doesn’t know exactly when their qi sessions became tea drinking as well. At one point, he had simply been told to pour his own tea when he wasn’t even aware it had been an option to join. And now, every other evening, Shen Qingqiu deems his presence acceptable enough for one (and only one) cup of tea.

The tea is about as necessary as qi transfer is these days.

Not that Shen Yuan will point that out, of course. Which is crazy. One year ago, he would have bitten anyone who told him he would grow used to Shen Qingqiu’s cold qi soothing his meridians- enough to look forward to it in the way he in a previous lifetime looked forward to coffee in the morning.

It’s not the most *pleasant* thing, still, but it is routine and it no longer feels like Shen Qingqiu is shoving ice water into his veins.

“This one heard that Shizun may leave for a night hunt soon?” he asks after some acceptable tea drinking time has passed.

“This master would not consider it a night hunt. It is more of a lesson,” Shen Qingqiu replies, saying *lesson* the way most would say *gross.* “One which will begin in two weeks.”

Oh shit, what???

Shen Yuan sits up straight.

“Is- has there- that is, this one wonders, who will be allowed to come with on this lesson?”

Shen Qingqiu gives him a *look.*

“Only those who have a soul bound sword will be allowed.”

Oh. Shen Yuan does not pout. He does *not* pout or slump his shoulders. It’s just- while he has

grown used to visiting the different peaks of Cang Qiong Mountain, he has not once been able to leave it to see the outside world since he first arrived.

And sure, Shen Yuan has seen the world *before.* But it doesn't quite count, with- with everything. There was one place and then he was just scrambling as fast as he fucking could towards the sect. There hadn't been time for any sightseeing.

"Oh," he mumbles, and takes a sad sip of his tea.

"Disciples Luo, Ning and Shen shall as such accompany this master to Wan Jian Peak tomorrow," Shen Qingqiu then says in the most bored, dull tone of voice ever known to man, "those who are able to find a sword shall be allowed onto the mission."

Shen Yuan sprays tea all over the table.

"... you are cleaning that up," Shen Qingqiu says, wrinkling his nose.

"I thought we wouldn't visit Wan Jian until we were fifteen at *least!?"* Shen Yuan shrieks.

"Lower your voice."

"Fifteen? Shizun? What happened to *fifteen?"*

"This master does not trust you to not stomp yourself off a cliff or some other such nonsense once we leave the mountain," Shen Qingqiu replies, which hey *fuck you,* "a sword of your soul would ensure that there is in fact a chance for your survival."

"I'm not that bad."

"Oh?" Shen Qingqiu raises one brow, smugness suddenly flowing from him like the most toxic of gasses, "then perhaps you were simply making friends with that rake? How kind of you."

Shen Yuan rears back.

"You saw that!? Wait- no! No, I don't know. I was checking it for- splinters."

"Mn. With your face."

His face burns. Shen Yuan wishes *he* had a fan. They sit close enough to the displays that he could probably snatch one from Shen Qingqiu's collection.

"Don't."

Shen Yuan snatches his hand back.

"Of course," Shen Qingqiu continues, pointedly snapping his fan open, clearly rubbing it into Shen Yuan's face that *he* has one, haha, loser, "a sword may only make such things worse.

However, you are long overdue for a mission away from the mountain and this master will not let you leave without a sword that will have the common sense you lack. Is this understood?"

He was talking about it as if it was a punishment. As if it was not the coolest thing, to go and get a *sword.* Shen Yuan bites his lip and nods.

"Disciple Ning already knows. I trust you to inform *the other one."*

As if Luo Binghe hadn't been listening in. As if Shen Yuan wasn't suddenly vibrating with the need to barge into their bedroom and shriek like a teenage girl given tickets to her favorite performer.

"Yes, Shizun," he says instead.

"Good. Now let us clear your meridians."

The bedroom they share used to be bare. Two beds and nothing more, the expectation that they would soon stop sleeping there hovering in the air. A year, however, is more than enough for two teenage boys to claim a space for themselves.

Shelves have gained books that should be returned to the library, notebooks that have been given a little too much love with how worn their spines are. There are crude wooden figures, some of them missing limbs, crowding in between pretty rocks and other types of fucked up crafts. Half of them are things that Luo Binghe made and would rather throw into the Abyss itself, and the other half are things which Shen Yuan made that Luo Binghe has refused to let him throw away in turn.

There are thick blankets and softer pillows which need to be restitched by someone who isn't fourteen. It feels *cozy,* in all its badly made glory. Qing Jing Peak is the Peak of arts and crafts, as much as it pretends to not be. Whatever time isn't spent cultivating or studying is encouraged to be spent creating.

Shen Yuan closes the door with a click.

Luo Binghe sits on their bed, blankets pulled up to his waist. His hair is no longer as wet as it was, but it still hangs down in heavy curls. His hairpin has been put aside on their tiny bed table by the lantern, the shadows flickering across the room.

Their eyes meet, both of them wide, both of their faces flushed. For a long moment, they only stare. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath.

“We are getting swords,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” Luo Binghe whispers back.

Shen Yuan grins so wide his cheeks hurt. And then finally he bursts, laughter spilling out, and he throws himself into bed to give Binghe a hug, the bed creaking in protest at the sudden movement.

“And we’re going on a mission!” he says, rocking them back and forth, too giddy with excitement to sit still because *holy shit SWORDS!!!* “Binghe, Binghe, Binghe! Swords!”

Luo Binghe laughs against his neck as he hugs back, warm puffs of air against skin because he laughs silently, his Binghe, and Shen Yuan giggles loud enough to make up for it.

“Swords, Yuan,” his friend says, and Shen Yuan giggles again, feeling ridiculous and for once he doesn’t *care.* Who wouldn’t be losing their shit over this? Insane people, that’s what!

He pulls back to tug his hair loose, putting aside his hairpin next to Binghe’s. And then, fuck, he has to get rid of his dumb robes, and so he does that too. Luo Binghe sighs in a long-suffering way and snatches each garment before Shen Yuan can let it fall to the floor.

“Yuan,” he chides, folding it all neatly, “put it on the bed,” he then adds, and Shen Yuan groans but does as told. He gets out of their bed to instead put it on the second one that… they should probably start using, what with being growing teenage boys.

For now, it mostly serves as the place they put their clothes on. Shen Yuan puts his pile of robes next to the pile that belongs to Luo Binghe, before he hurries to get back to their bed on bare feet.

A whole damn year and the floor is *still* cold as fuck.

At least Luo Binghe has given up on complaining about how Shen Yuan’s feet must be secretly cursed with ice demons. He only hisses once when Shen Yuan shamelessly tucks them against Binghe’s much warmer feet. Shen Yuan’s smug smile, however, has the protagonist pinch his side in retaliation.

“Binghe!” he hisses, squirming away.

“You earned it,” his evil best friend scolds.

“But swords,” Shen Yuan whines and presses close, and he should probably insist on braiding Luo Binghe’s hair to avoid getting any of it in his mouth as they sleep. But he is lazy and the bed is warm from having Luo Binge in it, and so he decides to pretend that he has just forgotten, actually, in all the excitement.

“Swords and your cold feet have nothing in common,” Luo Binghe says and wraps his arms around him. Binghe turns his face away to yawn against the pillow. “Lantern.”

“... I’m not going to be able to sleep, I’m too excited. I should read.”

“Try first,” Binghe mumbles and hides his face against Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “Read later.”

“Ugh, fine,” Shen Yuan says and kills the light with a flick of qi, because he can do that and he *will do it* when he can even if Shen Qingqiu claims he is only showing off. It’s too cool not to. Even if he for sure will end up reading throughout the night once Luo Binghe has fallen asleep because obviously the idea of swords is just too good to let Shen Yuan do something as silly as *sleep*. He doesn’t know how Binghe isn’t the same. Maybe it’s a Pavlov response to hugging Shen Yuan? Either way, *he* is immune and he already knows which book he will spend the night reading.

Minutes later, he is asleep.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Shizun, why do we have no girls but NYY? Is QJP sexist.
SQQ: it's because QQQ is a hoarding BITCH

I know I said timeskip! One year counts!!! A YEAR COUNTS OK!! ;A; anyway I got many plans for this arc, I hope you guys will like it ;D
That extra week sure gave me time to not only reread vol 1 but also to go and poke at oneshots... maybe one day I will actually finish them? Amazing.

And there is fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I'll skip descriptions for earlier fanarts! Go back to earlier chapter for those pls ;3
Also if you have made fanart, please tell me! I only use tumblr and tumblr itself isn't always reliable when it comes to notifications. So if you use twitter or anything else, I will likely miss it D:
Oh and I'm Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 5:
Friendodo

Chapter 6:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia

Chapter 8:
Dolly
Lady Dysnomi

Chapter 9:
Anqelbean

Chapter 10:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia
Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Absolutely adorable art of SY braiding an adoring LBH's hair by Frummpets!
And Anqelbean
drew this adorable moment of SY and LBH reenacting Romeo and Juliet <3
and... this absolutely hilarious comic made by Starry-stan-blog!
which made me laugh so fucking hard holy shit!! Absolutely nailed the vibe!!
Creafanee drew SY inspecting that Weird Spider while LBH and NYY discuss murder.
As they should <3

Chapter 12:
Starry Stan Blog drew SY being incredibly happy with his new hair <3
SQH asking what everyone at CQM is thinking by Liathcat

And these aren't chapter specific but ahhhh art!!!

SY and LBH having a snack by their tree! Made by sfwclwn
They also made an amazing lineup of The Bullies and the The Trio!

It's so fun to see what people make out of such vague descriptions! Perhaps I should've described ZD and CWY in more detail to make it easier but gosh creativity comes through once more <3

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a pangolin tugging at his pants and there are two children who are staring up at Wei Qingwei and he is, once again, reminded of the very badly kept secret of Cang Qiong Mountain.

Cultivators *love* kids.

At least, those from Cang Qiong Mountain do.

If they can't make any of their own they will, without fail, stumble upon a poor little orphan or some street child or, at times, even end up stealing a slave or two because *obviously* they wouldn't just *buy them.*

There are creches at each peak because the cultivators of their sect love kids and once they *have* a kid, they would sooner die than let some other peak than their own raise it. And so they have creches for kids born into the sect and children brought into it. Qian Cao Peak holds lessons once a year for their older disciples on childcare, though of course disciples of other peaks are *strongly* recommended to join.

Especially if they are of the age to go out on night hunts alone. Orphan children sniff out poor, lonesome and unsuspecting disciples the way Hong Jing sniffs out malicious spirits.

Wei Qingwei had only intended to pick *one* new disciple.

But Peng Xia and Peng Zihao are twins. Tiny twins of eleven years old, freckles scattered like stars across their chubby cheeks, eyes so pale brown that they may as well have been gold, their black hair the kind of choppy that implied they had, at one point, gotten something stuck in it.

He had decided on Peng Xia first, the girl having made a very *square* hole in her determination and also, well, Wei Qingwei's shimei had not yet arrived and she tended to hoard the girls the way magpies hoarded trinkets and Wei Qingwei hadn't had a girl disciple in *four years.* And then Peng Xia had turned her mournful eyes upon him and said *Shifu, may my brother join too?*

Wei Qingwei is not a heartless monster. *Obviously* he had to pick Peng Zihao too- who had, in fact, made a rectangle shaped hole and as such was clearly meant for Wan Jian Peak. A rectangle was one stop away from being sword shaped!

Two days have passed since the selection and the twins are now clean, dressed in the white and red uniform of Wan Jian Peak disciples. They seem unsure of who to stare at the most- Wei Qingwei or the pangolin tugging at his pants.

“Do you know what this is?” he asks and points at it.

The children shake their heads in unison. Cute.

“This is an armored pangolin,” Wei Qingwei says, “it is not a normal pangolin. Any pangolin who has those glowing scripts on their armored backs- see those? Yes, that- they are helping us in our duties here. Do you two know what our duties are?”

“Stabbing people,” they both say with an intent look in their eyes.

Creepy cute.

“We do not stab people,” Wei Qingwei says, “swords do not stab. They *slice* and *cut.* If you want to stab someone, this master recommends a knife. Or a short sword,” he adds, and pats his. “This one does not have a soul, but it *is* very good for stabbing. Now, with a *sword,* you have to slice. Do not go for the head first. You wouldn’t be able to reach, you two don’t even reach my chest, how would you decapitate me? No, slice the ankles or the arms first, that is the way to go at your height–”

“Was Wei-shixiong not meant to educate them on pangolins?” Mu Qingfang asks as he walks up to them, “or perhaps this shidi misunderstood.”

“A-Fang” he greets his sect sibling with a wide smile, “of course, but they are interested in the sharper points in life. Ha! Sharp points.” He chuckles. Mu Qingfang sighs, then gives the children that calm smile of his.

“This master needs to speak with your Shifu for a moment,” he kindly tells them, “although this one is certain your Shijie would be happy to pick up the lesson.”

Oh, Shi Biya was right there.

“Ah, my head disciple. Yes, she can handle it,” he says and shooes them off towards her, and then has to pry the pangolin off of his pants to hand it over to her as well, “this one will speak with his Shidi now.”

They wait a moment for the children to leave, Shi Biya’s voice soft as she explains the scripts on the pangolin’s back. Only once they are all out of hearing distance does Mu Qingfang speak.

“I do believe I asked you to call me Mu-shidi when we are not alone,” he wryly says. He does not sound terribly mad, however, so Wei Qingwei chuckles and gives his shoulder a squeeze.

“You are my favorite shidi,” he says, “how could I not make it obvious? But yes, this humble one apologizes. How may this one make it up to you?” Wei Qingwei pauses. “Why are you here, actually? Did I miss a meeting?”

“You did not,” Mu Qingfang assures him, because unlike *some* of their siblings, he does not play pranks, “however, I heard that Shen-shixiong will be here today with his younger disciples. I was curious.”

“Wait- aren’t they, what? Babies?”

“Fourteen, yes. Though I do believe Ning Yingying is fifteen.”

Wei Qingwei considers this for a moment. He has met Ning Yingying, of course. The girl clung to Shen Qingqiu’s sleeves the way a child clings to their mother’s skirts when she was younger, and one would risk a verbal lashing if they pointed it out.

For many years, Wei Qingwei had thought that Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge were the only ones of his sect-siblings to be immune to the thrall of children- Yue Qingyuan kept from them more because of his duties than anything else, firmly tied to the mountain as he was.

But Liu Qingge was always too single minded on his hunts, most often accepting the monster carcasses as payments rather than sticking around to hear what the villagers had to say. It was at times difficult to believe that he was an older brother, the way he treated little kids.

Shen Qingqiu in turn had aggressively ignored children and children, in turn, had been eager to stay away from the cold glare that could petrify even the most hardened warrior.

Needless to say, Wei Qingwei had been surprised when Shen Qingqiu dragged a little girl home with him after a night hunt; somehow, out of those two, he had still thought Liu Qingge was the one most at risk.

And obviously Wei Qingwei had heard all about the *new* child as well. The rumors had been going crazy for two whole years. Yue Qingyuan wouldn’t shut up about the boy, either, acting very much like he had possibly raised the child himself with how he spoke of *Xiao-Yuan.*

“I don’t *need* to be there when they look for a fitting sword,” Wei Qingwei says, “but I do want to. And is a Peak Lord not better than Master Gao? You had met the new one, hadn’t you? The son?”

“Shen-shixiong claims that Yuan-shizhi is not his son,” Mu Qingfang says.

“Right. But you’ve met him?”

Mu Qingfang sighs and flicks his cheek.

“Yes,” he says as Wei Qingwei steps back, rubbing his face. In his defense, Mu Qingfang can flick stones the way most shoot arrows. It *stings.* “Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe are both good children, though I have met Shen-shizhi more often. They may be younger than tradition demands, but it is only a year. This one sees no harm in it.”

“I hope Shen-shixiong won’t be upset if his child doesn’t find a sword,” Wei Qingwei groans, “and this will have Qi-shimei demand a visit as well, won’t it? And then *she* will complain as

well if there is no sword ready for *her* head disciple…"

"Quit complaining," Mu Qingfang fondly says, "they should arrive soon. Let us go and meet them instead."

"This one will always obey my healer's orders," Wei Qingwei says and takes the other man's hand into his. When it is not taken from him, he lifts it to his lips and presses a kiss to Mu Qingfang's knuckles, smiling as he meets Mu Qingfang's eyes.

"You are skirting the line, Wei-ge," Mu Qingfang says.

"But A-Fang is smiling," he replies, and gives the hand another kiss before he lets Mu Qingfang tug it free, tucking it away into his sleeves.

They walk towards the sword cliffs with a barely respectful distance between them, Mu Qingfang's longer sleeves brushing against him with each step. They pass pangolins and disciples carrying supplies, masters who are leaving their forges and masters returning to theirs. Wei Qingwei is fond of the scent that clings to his peak; smoke and fire and that strange pinprick scent of *clarity* as a sword sings its first tune.

He was always meant for Wan Jian Peak; ever since the Lord before him brought him home from a demon's war, cradling his young self so *gently* despite the fact that she had lost an arm. He had seen the sword cliffs and the pangolins and heard the swords sing and had known that he would always stay.

Helping their young find their very own sword is not part of his duties, not anymore. But it is still something he is fond of doing when he finds the time- and how could he not find the time for Shen Qingqiu's favorite children?

He sees them before they see him. They have stopped halfway up the stairs towards the sword cliffs, their green and white uniforms easy to see against the black and gray stairs of Wan Jian Peak.

There is Ning Yingying, her brown hair tied up in braided buns and decorated with bright orange ribbons. Babyfat stubbornly clings to her cheeks even at fifteen, though from her body shape he knows she would make a quick sword wielder. Perhaps she should have twin shortswords rather than just one?

Beside her stands a boy just slightly taller than her; fluffy dark hair put away in a tail, braids keeping stray locks from his face and tucked into the ponytail. A wooden pin, of a design he can't see from where they are standing, keeps it in place. His eyes are black and he is smiling. Wei Qingwei can see that he will grow up into someone with wide shoulders- likely he will be able to wield one of their heavier swords, possibly even be able to bond with one of their older ones.

They are both looking at the third one in their trio, who is crouched on the steps and seeming to have an intense discussion with a pangolin, the cause for their halt at the stairs.

Even from this distance, Wei Qingwei can see the resemblance to Shen Qingqiu. Hair darker than ink but just as shiny, and only a small amount of it tied out of the way for his face. Green eyes and hands that gesture sharp and quick, reminding Wei Qingwei of that time he had the pleasure of seeing Shen Qingqiu stab a man's eyes with needles. To be fair, he had been a very evil man.

But where Shen Qingqiu always looks cold as ice and pale as the finest jade, this boy is all eager smiles and excited movements.

"Huh," Wei Qingwei says, "from what I heard, I would have thought the child would be as… *grumpy* as Shen-shixiong. Does he not bite?"

"He does," Mu Qingfang says, amused, "he nearly bit me once. But when Shen-shizhi is not in the midst of a qi deviation, he is a sweet child. Though he is prone to accidents."

"Shen-shixiong's son is *clumsy?"*

"Not his son. Especially not when he can hear," Mu Qingfang says and nods towards the approaching green speck that is Shen Qingqiu on a sword. They watch as he comes to a stop by the children. They watch as Shen Yuan jumps to his feet and nearly falls down the mountain before the other boy grabs him and steadies him. Ning Yingying's laughter rings like a bell, loud and clear.

After what must be sharp scolding from their master, the children hurry up the stairs once more. Shen Qingqiu does not deign to join them; instead he uses his sword to fly to their destination, leaving the trio behind.

"The boy who once again saved Shen-shizhi's life is Luo Binghe," Mu Qingfang wryly says as they begin to walk once more, "let us hope they *both* find a sword today, or that neither does."

"Ah, one of those."

"One of those," Mu Qingfang nods.

Wan Jian Peak has waterfalls and long, winding stairs that come in black and gray which climb up the sharp cliffs of it, as if the peak itself is attempting to mimic the shape of blades. The stones of the stairs alternate between that black and gray in a non-repeating pattern. Shen Yuan wonders if it was a design choice, or only made because they were lazy and didn't want to go and get more stones of whatever color they ran out of- it works, though. It *looks* intentional.

The waterfalls fill the air with a constant rumbling sound and a barely there humidness which even Qing Jing Peak lacks.
He wonders if the waterfalls are everywhere on Wan Jian Peak- he wants to *see.* But they had been directed towards the sword cliffs, which apparently meant following stairs going away from the areas that were actually populated. From afar, Shen Yuan sees the smoke of smitheries, the tiny dots of people practicing sword forms.

“Do you think Shizun will mind if I go back and pick up that pangolin?” he asks, looking behind them.

The pangolin has settled down into a ball. Brown and armored, with strange, glowing scripts all along its back. He knows they help with enchanting things, with finding the right ore to make into proper swords for souls to inhabit and he knows they are more intelligent than a normal pangolin would be.

But also they’re fucking *cute* and he wants to carry one around the way he and his sister used to carry around the family cat.

“Shizun seems low on patience already,” Luo Binghe says. At least he actually uses his manners when out in public, Shen Yuan wryly thinks, “perhaps we will meet more of them at the cliffs?”

“Do you think I could swim up those waterfalls?” Ning Yingying asks, pointing at the ones that seem to connect to where the smoke of smithing is the thickest.

Do they use it as help for that? Water power? Water wheels? He doesn’t know but he wants to learn. Luo Binghe never visited the actual Wan Jian Peak in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* He only ever went to the sword cliffs which is, like, super cool all on its own but–

“They aren’t as big as the ones on this side,” Luo Binghe says, “but no, this one does not think that Shijie would be able to.”

“Perhaps Shizun can!”

They all take a moment to consider the image of Shen Qingqiu flawlessly swimming up a waterfall. It’s an awful image. It would be too cool, or he would possibly look like a drowned rat. Either way, it would end with a murder because Shen Yuan knows someone would have to push him into one for it to happen.

“Are your feet weighed? Why are you walking so slow?” Shen Qingqiu asks them as they approach, glaring.

Shen Yuan wants to point out that unlike *some* people, they had to walk the whole damn way. But because Shen Yuan is a good disciple who doesn’t talk back in public, he forces a smile.

“This one apologizes, Shizun,” he says.

Shen Qingqiu's look of pure judgment tells Shen Yuan that his smile is the most fake thing he has ever seen and that he is deeply disappointed with Shen Yuan's shitty acting skills.

Luo Binghe's smile is far more genuine when he apologizes, even though Shen Yuan knows for a *fact* that Binghe is faking it even harder. Unfair. The protagonist's halo strikes again!

"Sorry, Shizun," Ning Yingying says and bounces up the last steps, "we are here now! Where shall we go? It smells so *very* strange here, does it not? Wet and smokey and *weird*- oh! Shishu! And Shishu!"

Oh?

Shen Yuan blinks and looks past Shen Qingqiu to the two men behind him. He recognizes Mu Qingfang who sends them a small, polite smile. His sleeves are loose for once, rather than tied out of the way- perhaps because there is no medical emergency. And with him there is the man who must be Wei Qingwei.

Wei Qingwei is a *pretty boy.*

This, Shen Yuan realizes, is not at all what he wants to see. He knows that Liu Qingge is a *pretty boy* the rare times he has run into the man, but it had always been overshadowed by the fact that he had been watching the guy's hands to make sure the bastard didn't try and grab him again.

Wei Qingwei is tall with broad shoulders, his eyes black and curious like a bird's. He is dressed in black and red robes, practical and tight-fitting compared to the flowing elegance of Shen Qingqiu's teal, and a sense of casual danger that Mu Qingfang lacks. His black hair is tied up into a long, flowing ponytail of graying curls and the crown keeping it in place is bronze colored and intricately shaped like vines.

There are. Fucking tattoos. Peeking past his arm bracers, crawling up his fucking *neck.* Scripts, of some kind, looking nearly as if someone had painted on the man rather than stuck him with a needle five billion times with how smoothly they flowed.

He has a charming face. A charming, youthful, pretty face with a strong jaw and dimples, the kind of face that in any other place would have gotten him about ten grandmas trying to shove their granddaughters at him.

And yet he is hanging off of Mu Qingfang like *he* is a pangolin, nuzzling at his neck as if he is trying to make a home there. Mu Qingfang does not seem to mind.

Shen Yuan's entire world feels like it's shifting in the most awful way.

Mu Qingfang is gay.

His sensible, patient Shishu is *gay.*

Like, there is no other explanation. Shen Yuan catches Wei Qingwei pressing a kiss to Mu

Qingfang's throat before he steps away and offers a smile that says *who, me?* and obviously they all fucking saw it. Shen Yuan stares. Luo Binghe, Ning Yingying and Shen Qingqiu look like there is nothing wrong.

Well, no. Shen Qingqiu looks disgusted.

Of course the Scum villain is *homophobic,* he thinks, feeling half-hysterical. Of course! Why wouldn't he be? It's not like Mu Qingfang saves lives or anything! So what if he is gay and- and dating some hooligan with *tattoos?* In this setting? Shen Yuan tries to remember anyone who had tattoos in *Proud Immortal Demon Way* who also wasn't pure evil and/or fated to a messy death.

Oh fuck, is his one and only sensible uncle going to fucking lose his boyfriend to a future Luo Binghe rampage? Wei Wingwei is cannon fodder??? Oh shit. Oh no.

"Hello," Wei Qingwei says, "this master is Wei Qingwei! Shishu to you guys, of course," he laughs and they all offer the polite bow that is required, even if Shen Yuan swears his bones creak like old hinges when he bows because he- it's just- that's fucking- *Mu Qingfang is–???*

"This one was unaware that Wei-shidi was going to guide us today," Shen Qingqiu bites out.

"It is a special occasion," Wei Qingwei replies, "now, let this one explain how this will work! For I am sure you are all very excited to see if there is a sword for you, yes? Now, the most important thing to know is that sometimes there is no sword to have. There have been cases were disciples did not find a sword until adulthood–"

Swords??? Swords???? Mu Qingfang was gay and he might just end up a fucking *widow* and they were supposed to focus on SWORDS!?

Fuck, he really wanted one though.

"Yuan?" Luo Binghe gives his hand a squeeze.

"Binghe," he replies and squeezes back before he tugs his hand away, because even if they are *gay* (GAY!!!), their martial uncles are right there and Shen Yuan doesn't want to look like a baby in front of them.

Shen Yuan meets the eyes of Wei Qingwei and he plans to offer a nice, polite smile to make up for not listening and to show that he is totally fucking okay with gay people but also he kind of wants to make sure Wei Qingwei will treat Mu Qingfang well and–

"Why do you have tattoos," he blurts out and immediately wants to die.

Wei Qingwei looks at him and then grins.

(+10 F-points! Congratulations, Peak Lord Wei Qingwei of Wan Jian Peak Has Been Acquired!)

What!!!

“They are practical,” Wei Qingwei says and then he turns around, gesturing for them to follow, “now! Swords! Come along, children of the bamboo! Bamboo sprouts. That is now what you are.”

“I’ll grow very tall,” Ning Yingying says, and Shen Yuan feels like if they knew how to high-five, they would. Thankfully they do not know what such a thing is and instead they exchange a mischievous grin that Shen Qingqiu clearly hates. Shen Yuan decides he also hates it; Wei Qingwei didn’t even answer his question!

“This one is taller than A-Ying,” Shen Yuan says, like an idiot, but it is the truth and he would sooner die than let Ning Yingying be taller than him *ever again.*

“A-Yuan will always be my shidi,” she replies and gives him the kind of smug smile that reminds him of ancient memes and a desire to shove her down the stairs.

“Behave,” Shen Qingqiu says in that special way of his, where he *sounds* calm and collected but they, his unfortunate victims, can hear the threat of being smacked by his fan hard enough to see stars.

They shut up.

Instead they follow as Wei Qingwei leads the way. At times he gestures to swords they pass- and there *are* swords. Shen Yuan is happy to stop thinking about… *the gays,* once he realizes the sword cliffs are well and truly *sword cliffs.*

There is Hong Jing, a sword that didn’t ever unsheathe itself until Luo Binghe came to raze the sect to the ground. There is the Obsidian Blade, wielded by one of the founders of the sect and never again since. Swords using the mountain itself as its scabbard, waiting for the person worthy of wielding them.

They are led into a cave. A cave so large that it hardly feels like one, the ceiling beyond their sight and the cave walls dotted with the hilts of swords and glowing crystals. Shen Yuan tugs at his sleeves, feeling nauseous with excitement and nerves. Both Ning Yingying and Luo Binghe look the same, their eyes impossibly wide as they look around.

Shen Qingqiu and Mu Qingfang linger by the entrance, silent.

“These swords have souls,” Wei Qingwei says, looking more serious than ever before as he turns to face them, making sure they all meet his eyes before he continues, “some are young and some are old. Some have had many wielders, some have had none. They each have their own strength. If one deems you worthy, you will honor that choice.”

Wei Qingwei looks towards the walls, eyes lingering, before he turns back to them. Shen Yuan’s heart is beating like a drum in his chest and he is trying his very best to stand still and not bounce like an hyperactive child.

“There is no need to touch every sword,” Wei Qingwei says, “once you walk by a sword compatible with you, you will know. When you grasp the hilt, the sword will examine you the way you examine it. Some may reject you outright, some may ask you to wait. Some will unsheathe for you and only you. Now! Are you ready to seek out your sworn blade?”

“Yes, Shishu,” they all say, and Wei Qingwei’s serious face drops back into a smile.

“Then do so. Avoid getting your souls sucked out!”

With that ominous comment, Wei Qingwei lets them loose in the cave.

At first they stick together; the cave is beautiful and terrifying in all its might, and their little quest is scary in a whole different way. Even Ning Yingying looks nervous, a rare look on her face. Shen Yuan balls his sleeves up into his hands as they walk, resisting the urge to grab Luo Binghe’s hand.

“Oh,” Ning Yingying gasps after what feels like forever, and then she darts off to the side to tug at a sword’s hilt. What was a tug becomes simply holding as she stops and tilts her head. It is as if she is listening to something they can’t hear.

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both wait with bated breath.

Ning Yingying nods, her bright ribbons flickering like fire in the glow of the crystals, before she lets go.

“It told me I’m too wild for it,” she says. She doesn’t even seem disappointed, and Shen Yuan admires her acceptance.

“What did it feel like?” he asks, and he can’t help but drag a finger against the hilt as well, engraved with a crane in the middle of a dance. There is no response to it, none except the vague tickling of qi, like static against his skin. Which makes sense. It *does* have a soul.

“It was a bit like someone tapped me on my shoulder,” Ning Yingying says, wrinkling her nose in thought, “but in my belly? By my core! It felt very strange, but not bad. Like warm honey?”

“You make no sense,” Shen Yuan tells her.

Ning Yingying puffs up her cheeks.

“A-Yuan will see,” she says threateningly, “You will agree with your Jiejie! Just you wait!”

“Oh, so scary,” Shen Yuan says and swoons against Luo Binghe who catches him easily, “Binghe! Protect me from the *warm honey.”*

“This humble one won’t let a single smear land on my most esteemed shixiong,” Luo Binghe solemnly promises, then laughs as Shen Yuan squawks in protest and shoves him away, swatting like an angry cat.

“Ugh!” he scoffs, “I’m- this one is going! Over there,” he snaps and stomps off in a vague direction. He ignores their dumb snickering laughter as they follow close behind. Stupid childhood sweethearts, why are they bonding over making fun of him? Huh??? That’s *not* romantic!

Ning Yingying keeps being tugged off by swords as they continue. Soon, she waves them off as she turns around a corner, the cave beginning to split up into smaller parts. Not quite tunnels- the roof of it is still impossible to see and the walls too far away- but enough that it is noticeable. It leaves Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe alone, wandering these strange hallways of stone.

“... if shijie gets a sword and we don’t,” Shen Yuan whispers, “I will leave the sect, I *swear.”*

“We will for find our swords,” Luo Binghe says, though the confidence he had last night seems a bit lacking now, “perhaps Shijie’s soul is new enough that all the new swords like her? Possibly?”

“I’m not sure that makes any sense, Binghe.”

“Well, it might. We are passing by older swords now.”

Which was true. It was easy to tell; the hilts of the swords they were passing now were more… archaic in design. The crystals were bigger and shifting in colors, the path more worn down than the wide cave floor of before. Shen Yuan can’t help but touch each hilt they pass, only ever getting that tickle of qi against his and nothing else. He tells Luo Binghe about how he read that the crystals are concentration of pure qi, gathered over decades and centuries from the swords and the mountain itself. His best friend nods along, sometimes letting his own fingers brush against them, the glow briefly painting his skin in a myriad of colors.

And then Luo Binghe stops; he stares up at a hilt far above them. Shen Yuan stops as well, and he remembers this- Luo Binghe’s first meeting with Zheng Yang.

It is high up; enough that Shen Yuan wonders how the *fuck* Binghe will get up there. They stare up at it for a long moment, before Shen Yuan nudges him.

“Is Binghe not going to touch it?”

Luo Binghe blinks, then smiles at him.

“Of course,” he says, and then he goes back to staring. But now his dark eyes are bouncing between sword hilts and crystals. Shen Yuan smiles and steps back, eager to watch the protagonist figure out the best route. He remembers reading this part, for sure. It’s… vague, the way things get when it’s been so many years. But he *does* remember it.

Luo Binghe squares his shoulders and then he leaps.

He lands on a crystal; soft and quick as a petal in the wind before he jumps and lands against

a hilt. On and off he goes, bouncing between each little step he can, brows furrowed in concentration as he uses qi to make himself lighter, as he boosts himself just enough to get to the next step. The glow of the crystals makes his shadow a soft, hazy thing as it washes over Shen Yuan.

And then; Luo Binghe grabs hold of Zheng Yang.

For a moment he hangs there, clinging to it, feet placed against the cave wall when there is nothing else to stand on. Shen Yuan bites his lip and watches. He shakes his hands free from his sleeves and flexes his fingers, wondering if he can help, if it is too early for the protagonist to get his sword. If Luo Binghe falls, can he soften it?

But then there is the sound of metal against stone.

Luo Binghe does not so much pull Zheng Yang out of the wall as it seems to push into his hand. The steel glints in a burst of colors as the crystals' glow bounce against it, and then Luo Binghe lands as soft as a leaf on water before him.

Binghe's cheeks are flushed, his eyes dark and his smile wide. Shen Yuan's heart beats fast in his chest, feeling nearly like a bird trying to take flight.

"Yuan," Luo Binghe breathes and Shen Yuan watches his hand grasp at the hilt, "this is Zheng Yang."

"H-hello," Shen Yuan says, and then he snatches his hands back as he realizes he almost touched the blade. Shen Yuan's face feels hot.

Zheng Yang is a sword he always wished to see, back before he became part of this world. It was also the one thing Luo Binghe had never let anyone, not even Ning Yingying, ever touch. It had been the first thing that had told Luo Binghe he was worth more than woodsheds and beatings. It had been the first thing no one could say he was unworthy of, because Zheng Yang had chosen him and no one else.

And Shen Yuan had nearly touched it without thinking.

"No, you can," Binghe assures him, taking Shen Yuan's hand and–

The blade feels warm. Like it has been out in the sun, soaking up a scorching warmth which the blade has then tempered into something softer. It also feels *alive* in such a way that the other swords hadn't. The hilt has a pattern of dragon scales, copper colored like a low-setting sun. Shen Yuan lets his fingers run across the steel, a bare skimming of fingertips as he follows the bold engravings on it.

"Righteous Sun," he mumbles.

"It feels warm," Luo Binghe says, looking down at it with awe, "like it could burn me, but it won't."

“It fits Binghe,” Shen Yuan says, and he reluctantly stops touching it, “I hope- I hope that I find one that fits me just as well.”

“Yuan will,” Binghe says, as confident as the night before, and Shen Yuan almost laughs. Instead his heart flutters in a way that tickles, and he clears his throat and moves away.

“Maybe,” he says, “but I have to keep looking first.”

“I’ll follow.”

“Binghe is supposed to go back to Shishu, once you find a sword.”

“Wei-shishu didn’t say that,” Luo Binghe denies, carefully holding Zheng Yang so that its blade won’t scrape against stone or get caught in their clothes, “so I’ll follow Yuan until we can both leave.”

“If Binghe is sure…”

“Always,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan laughs.

So they continue to walk, and sometimes Zheng Yang pulses with warm light when Luo Binghe forgets himself. It reminds them of how they will have to *practice* for these weeks leading up to whatever mission Shen Qingqiu plans to drag them out on, like flying and sword seals that they have memorized but never actually *used.*

“You’re good at the martial aspects, and I’m alright with the spiritual ones,” Shen Yuan muses, tapping a large crystal as they walk past it, purple-pink fading into a bright white, “though of course Binghe is good at *everything.”*

“Everything? Yuan is being humble,” Luo Binghe replies, “this one could never memorize all the beasts and demons that Yuan has.”

“That’s not- in a fight, that hardly matters!”

“But who will point out the weak spot of a False Jade Serpent, if not Yuan? Who would remind this one that the two-headed blue lobster eats qi and spits it out like lightning?”

“Well, clearly you,” Shen Yuan huffs, face red, “since you *do* remember.”

Honestly! The protagonist claiming he doesn’t have a flawless memory? Shameless! Just because he wants to coax Shen Yuan’s own confidence, as if that is needed. He is perfectly happy being the sidekick. Sure, he looks forward to using all they have learned against monsters and beasts, but he will happily leave all the big, scary things to Luo Binghe.

Binghe has the protagonist’s halo, after all. Shen Yuan feels like he himself would be excellent cannon fodder and a good revenge plot device if one wanted to go a little shonen-brotherhood-theme. He would rather avoid *that,* thanks.

“But Yuan remembers *more,”* Binghe insists as they turn a corner.

Shen Yuan stops.

Before them, there is water. Scattered across the room like thrown out go stones, there are ponds, or perhaps they look more like tide pools. Clusters of crystals grow out from the floor instead of the walls, lingering by the edges of some of them and as a result makes the room look darker than the hallways they have walked through until now.

The water is also dark and glinting in the soft glow the crystals shed, and from where they are standing he can’t see if there is anything in them.

They remind him of Luo Binghe’s eyes, he thinks, a stray thought that flutters by. Because what has his focus is not the water nor Binghe.

There is a sword sticking out of one of the ponds.

A hilt, barely visible in the darkness. But he can feel how it tugs at him, like how he would test the strings of a guqin. A gentle plucking that has him take a step forward, and then one more.

Shen Yuan stops by the pond and stares.

The water is just as dark as Binghe’s eyes; glitters much the same, deep like the night sky, like it has been plucked from the heavens and spread out before him. He can’t see the bottom, nor a hint of what the blade might look like. Shen Yuan can only see the hilt; black and smooth, except for three silver moons; crescent and half-full, and there, at the end of the pommel: the full moon, glossy like a pearl dusted with silver.

Shen Yuan has to step into the water to reach it. He is grateful when it only reaches his knees, having been terrified of not finding a bottom to stand on. The water itself is cold as ice, and Shen Yuan shudders as he stands in it. But even that fades away when he finally grabs the hilt.

Wei Qingwei had said that the sword would examine them.

There is again that tug. Someone who is skimming their fingers across his very soul, to see what melody he might make. Shen Yuan had expected maybe questions, possibly a voice. He knows, vaguely, that the book mentioned how Luo Binghe felt like he was speaking with a small sun, quick and decisive flashes of warmth that were words without a voice. A young soul eager to find a wielder as passionate as itself.

This is more like if he was playing the guqin with someone else. One hand each, playing a question the way a melody fills a room. Strings of silver and something old but gentle, and Shen Yuan relaxes. The cold of the water fades away as he leans into the feeling of music and soft clarity, never sharp, only gentle.

The soul touches upon his desire for change; it lingers at the rough edges he often ignores,

the presence like a balm against things he pretends never happened. It glows upon his wish to help.

It feels older than it should be, just like him.

Shen Yuan pulls the sword out; the blade pale like the moons in its hilt, the letters of its name flowing down like water.

Fu Yue.

Chapter End Notes

MQF: *does not look like a gay stereotype*
SY: this seems??? weird??? hello???
WQW: *kisses his boyfriend*
SY: YOU CAN JUST. DO THAT??? HERE???? WHAT IS THIS!
SQQ: ew, PDA.
SY: omg a homophobe.... <- the only homophobic person in all of PIWD

Swords!!! And if anyone is curious, I picked the name for SY's sword because Fu means Lotus/Abundant and Yue means Moon/Pearl. What kind of love interest would he be, if he didn't have a sword that matches LBH's "righteous sun"???

I also want to warn people that with how the cold season has begun over here, there is always a risk I might miss a monday as everyone around me are getting sick and I am sorry to say I am not immune to such things. Hopefully I stay healthy but if I don't update a week without warning, then you know why! Me or someone close to me is probably coughing their lungs out.

And there is fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I'll skip descriptions for fanarts! Also if you have made fanart, please tell me! I only use tumblr and tumblr itself isn't always reliable when it comes to notifications. So if you use twitter or anything else, I will likely miss it D:
Oh and I'm Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 5:
Friendodo

Chapter 6:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia

Chapter 8:
Dolly
Lady Dysnomi

Chapter 9:
Anqelbean

Chapter 10:
Friendodo
Lady Dysnomia
Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Frummpets!
Anqelbean
Starry-stan-blog!
Creafanee

Chapter 12:
Starry Stan Blog
Liathcat

Chapter 13:
magnes-io

And these aren't chapter specific but ahhhh art!!!

sfwclwn
The Bullies
The Trio!
Anqelbean

It's so fun to see what people make out of such vague descriptions! Perhaps I should've described ZD and CWY in more detail to make it easier but gosh creativity comes through once more!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One of the best things about being a cultivator is that Shang Qinghua no longer has any allergies.

He used to sneeze and drip and look half-deranged every fucking Spring back before he had self-inflicted shock therapy (death), because allergy meds were expensive and he spent most of his time indoors anyways, so they were also a waste if he wanted other cool stuff like food, electricity and maybe even an apartment to sleep in. The little things in life!

And he kind of maybe had some of the same allergies in this world (unfair!) which is like the worst thing a supposed-god-author-whatever can have. Fucking pollen allergies! In a world without allergy meds! In a world with *plants every-fucking-where!* But as a cultivator, he can just *swoosh* that away with his awesome golden core.

It means Shang Qinghua can leave the window open to let in a cool breeze. It means that when he sees the Spring flowers bloom, he doesn't want to reach for a lighter and set it all ablaze.

His door is still unlocked though! So Cucumber-bro has no excuse tumbling through the window with a yelp, because the door was right there and Shang Qinghua *knows* that the little dude knows how doors work.

"Bro," he says and puts down the ledger he had been working on- Zui Xian Peak is trying to rip him off again, he swears, why can't Long Sheng Peak handle transporting all the shit they need for booze making and food making and blah blah? Long Sheng is the agricultural peak! Why does An Ding have to be the fucking middleman??? Lazy assholes!

"Bro," Shang Qinghua repeats, "the door was, like, right there."

Shen Yuan gets to his feet and marches over. His green eyes are intent, his hairpin slightly askew from the fall. He looks very much like he sprinted over to An Ding, which probably means an angry Shen Qingqiu or a worried Luo Binghe is on the way and that he should commission a new door ASAP.

And then Shen Yuan holds out a sword in a white scabbard, cheeks flushed pink, and grins the way only a child can when they are proud.

"Sword!" Shen Yuan says, and then does a little bounce, "Airplane, I have a sword!"

Shang Qinghua blinks. He stares at the sword, at its black hilt and its white scabbard. He remembers then that Yue Qingyuan had been fretting yesterday about how *Xiao-Yuan* was currently visiting Wan Jian Peak to get his sword, all the while clutching at Xuan Su's handle

in a too harsh grip that revealed more than he could possibly know to someone like Shang Qinghua.

He looks at Shen Yuan, Peerless Cucumber, the most intense hate-reader he has ever had, who is still beaming a big smile at him, his eyes sparkling and practically vibrating on the spot with his attempt at standing still, no worse for wear.

In five years, Shen Yuan might look as scary as Shen Qingqiu.

Like, Shen Qingqiu is the man-eating tiger that killed half a village. And Shen Yuan is the cub with the really, really big paws. The danger is there and it will come for them all one day!

But right now Shang Qinghua only wants to give those cheeks a pinch.

"Good job, bro," he says instead and watches as Shen Yuan lights up impossibly brighter, straight up hugging the sword to his chest. It's… cute. Shang Qinghua sucks with kids, but it's *cute* and it's *Cucumber-bro* and he grins back and leans forward, "so what's the name?"

"Fu Yue," Shen Yuan says, and looks down at the sword in his arms. There is no tassel yet, but even without one it *is* gorgeous. Figures.

Well, alright, so Shang Qinghua's sword isn't too shabby. Han Xing may be as average as a soul sword can be, perfectly matching his own shitty cultivation. But it still serves him well when it comes to travel. It's just that the hilt is brown and normal, the scabbard unassuming and the blade itself looks like any kind of blade if one ignores the one (one!) starburst shape at the very tip of it.

Fu Yue looks like the kind of sword a protagonist's most important sidekick *would* have. He's not jealous! Not enough, anyway, to make him ruin the joy that is just oozing out of Shen Yuan.

He knows that the kid is older than he looks, with the memories of a different lifetime crowding his head, just like it does Shang Qinghua. But he *also* knows that means shit when the body is still a child's.

Cucumber-bro may want to be treated like the adult he claims he is, but right now he is acting very much like a teenage boy showing off to someone whose opinion he respects.

Shang Qinghua stops.

Wait. Holy shit.

"Dude," he breathes, "you *respect me."*

Shen Yuan blinks and looks at him, confused.

"What?"

“You value my opinion!”

“Wha- no I don’t!” Shen Yuan protests, face instantly going full tomato-red.

“Yes you do!” Shang Qinghua cackles so hard he nearly hits his head against the desk, wheezing as he bends over, “you respect me! Hack-writer *who?”*

“I can stab you! I can, I have a sword now!” Shen Yuan says and does a stomp with his foot, only to immediately look mortified that he just *did that.* Shang Qinghua is fucking crying, holy shit.

Shen Yuan, face red, grabs a paperweight.

After Shang Qinghua survives the bludgeoning attempt and after Shen Yuan looks more pink and less “boiled lobster out to kill a chef”, they sit down and pretend that Shang Qinghua’s piles of scrolls and papers haven’t been toppled in the scuffle, nor that there is ink spilled all across the floor and also that they both have smears of it dotted across their person. They are great at pretending.

“It really is a cool sword though, bro,” Shang Qinghua tells him, “congrats.”

“It was really cool finding it,” Shen Yuan says and makes a failed attempt at not looking like a bright eyed teenage boy who got all his dreams come true, “what, um, what was it like for you?”

“Me? Han Xing was kinda at the very start of the cave, not because it was new or anything, just, uh. People had kind of ignored it? It was…” Shang Qinghua looks at it, where it rests against the desk. Usually he keeps Han Xing tucked away in his qiankun sleeve and only brings it out for travel, but Cucumber-bro had wanted to see it, so. “It felt like I was holding a sparkler that was burning just a little too close to my fingers, but in a fun way,” Shang Qinghua says.

There had been more than that, of course. But trying to put that shit into words would be too impossible. It felt safe and exhilarating and a bit like sitting in a café with a fellow office worker. Han Xing’s sword glare was barely good enough for a Peak Lord, but Han Xing *was* fast as fuck when it came down to it.

“Have you tried making a sword glare yet?” he asks, “what color?”

“Ah, not yet,” Shen Yuan says and sinks further down in the seat. There’s a smear of ink against his cheek, narrowly missing his eye, “Ming Fan is going to show us how to fly tomorrow. And other stuff.”

“Ming Fan? *Really?”*

“He *is* the head disciple! And he’s not that bad anymore, not after Zhao De got kicked out.”

“I guess it makes sense that Shen-shixiong won’t do it,” Shang Qinghua muses, “he would probably just kill you. He is not a patient dude.”

Which was tragically funny, considering how often *Xiao-Jiu* had told *Qi-ge* to stop and think and to not be too impulsive. Not that Shang Qinghua would tell anyone *ever* about that. Not even Cucumber-bro. Shen Qingqiu would find out and then use a guqin string to garrot him in his sleep. RIP Cucumber-bro’s unending thirst for details, Shang Qinghua is *not* about that life.

“He’s so bad with kids. *Why* does he work with them?”

“Well, it’s not like us Peak Lords hang with you babies much,” Shang Qinghua says and avoids the melon seed thrown at his face with a grin, “we’re too busy for that! He’s supposed to handle everything else and at most just like… pick out a kid maybe once a year. And usually he doesn’t even bother with that, all those nobles like to send their kids in for the test and boom, free noble rich kid.”

“Ugh.”

“I get the merchant kids,” Shang Qinghua helpfully adds, to which Shen Yuan scoffs, “anyway, never mind all that. Are you excited for your first mission? It’s a big deal!”

“Don’t talk to me like that!” Shen Yuan hisses like the prickly kitten he is.

“Dunno what you’re talking about, bro,” Shang Qinghua innocently replies. “C’mon, surely the System has something to say about it!”

And–

Suddenly Shen Yuan looks too much like Shen Qingqiu. Face going perfectly blank, just shutting down. It’s like a magic trick with how it happened- face expressive and then Shang Qinghua blinked and it just wasn’t anymore.

That, uh. That probably means something.

“Bad shit?” he asks, wincing.

“I don’t know.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t… I don’t like accepting missions from it. From the System.”

Well, that just made sense. The System was a shady piece of shit for *sure,* and accepting a mission usually led to something horrifying or embarrassing and sometimes even both. Was Cucumber-bro just protecting his thin face, going all blank like that?

“Fair,” Shang Qinghua says, “but it might give hints, yeah? You will need it! Binghe didn’t go out on any missions at this age, he barely got to leave the sect at all before he got, uh. You know. Anyway, it means you will run into something new and that’s *never* fun, bro.”

Shen Yuan groans.

“I *guess…”*

Right about then they hear loud voices and clamoring. Shen Yuan’s eyes widen and he makes an admirable attempt to dive behind Shang Qinghua’s desk, but no! Fuck that!

“No!” Shang Qinghua protests and tries to block access to his desk, because the idiot is trying to crawl in under it, “no! Bro, you *know* what happened last time they found you there! I nearly died!”

“But what if it’s *him!* He will be so- so *Qingqiu!”*

“Even more reason to not die? Hello???”

The door slams open.

“Yuan!” Luo Binghe yells, eyes wide and wild, “are you alright!?”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Shang Qinghua says and shoves Shen Yuan hard enough to make the little guy stumble. He doesn’t fall, of course, because Luo Binghe catches him while giving Shang Qinghua the nastiest glare a barely fourteen year old can make.

Hey!!! I fucking made you!!! Shang Qinghua doesn’t scream because he likes breathing and living and all the cool stuff that comes with it.

“I’m *fine,* Binghe,” Shen Yuan says and swats away searching hands, and then repeats it when Luo Binghe tries to wipe away the ink on his face, “I was just visiting Hua-shishu.”

Hua-shishu.

As if addressing him like that will lessen the killer glare from the future Demon Emperor of the Three Realms! At least Shen Yuan doesn’t call him Hua-ge, then Yue Qingyuan would be on his ass too. This sect isn’t big enough for two geges.

“And now the visit is over!” Shang Qinghua says, clinging to the simple truth that he is their Shishu, he is a Peak Lord and they are *fucking fourteen!* He will cling to his imaginary power with his fucking *fingernails!* “Bye! Nice seeing you, Xiao-Yuan.”

Shen Yuan flushes bright red, but it’s not like he can tell Shang Qinghua off for it. That would be *weird,* wouldn’t it, Cucumber-bro?

Shang Qinghua makes sure to lock the door after them.

With a talisman. For good measure.

Between the peaks of Cang Qiong Mountain, there are rivers.

They snake around the mountains like deep blue serpents, often hidden by foliage and mist. Shen Yuan knows they are offshoots from the Luo river, branches of ice cold water that end in deep, dark lakes.

The lakes didn't come up a lot in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* They only really came up *once,* actually, and Shen Yuan had kind of forgotten about it. Blissful ignorance was a thing, after all, and when finding Fu Yue he had very happily ignored the other steps one needed to go through with a cool, magical sword whose soul bound itself to you.

But now Ming Fan stands before one of those lakes, staring down the three of them. At sixteen years old he has grown just barely taller than Shen Yuan, his dark hair tied up into a bun and the sign of Qing Jing's head disciple stitched into his robes. The dark lake does an excellent job of highlighting the green and white of his uniform, making him *almost* look impressive as he stands there, hands on hips like a very disappointed housewife.

"As the one in charge of training you three in the very *basics* of sword wielding, I expect nothing but respect and diligence!" Ming Fan says, "You will eventually go back to Master Meng, *obviously,* but since Master Meng is off on a mission and won't be back before we leave on our own mission, Shizun has honored this one with educating you!"

He pauses. Shen Yuan tugs on his sleeves. Ning Yingying rocks back and forth on her heels and Luo Binghe is looking at Ming Fan in that kind of way that Shen Yuan recognizes, where he isn't *actually* looking but just kind of holding up the fake-polite vibes of it because it's easier than picking a fight.

Honestly, Ming Fan isn't that bad! Not anymore!

He is still prickly and very *I'm a head disciple!!!* at times, but as someone who now spends a bit too much time hanging around Shen Qingqiu, he can admit that Ming Fan is actually good at being a head disciple. It's all about organization and paperwork and everything boring; settling arguments that are too petty to bring Shen Qingqiu's attention to and just weird enough that no teacher or master can bother with it.

Being a head disciple seems like the kind of thing Luo Binghe would, of course, be the best at. If he wanted to be one. Shen Yuan, who very much does *not* want all that and also knows that Luo Binghe looks at Ming Fan like he is a very smelly ant, wishes Ming Fan all the luck

in his future peak lord duties as a paperwork manager.

Except right now he kind of wants to take back the well-wishes.

“You will learn how to fly today,” Ming Fan says, “and we will do so above the lake behind me, so that if you fall, you won’t be hurt.”

Yes, because fucking *freezing to death* seems better.

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

“Why don’t we do something like… like using nets or something?” he asks, rubbing his thumb against the pale pommel of Fu Yue, “why must we fall into the *water?”* It’s early spring! Luo river is cold on a *normal day,* and the lake before them looks, somehow, colder.

“And who would hold those nets? Don’t bother your superiors with such a dumb task,” Ming Fan scolds in that snotty way of his that makes Shen Yuan once again wish he had a fan, just so he could make funny faces behind it as Ming Fan talks, “not wanting to fall into the water is a very good incentive! Now, channel your qi into your sword to make it float.”

This, at least, Shen Yuan feels secure in.

Fu Yue hovers at the perfect height to step up on it; Luo Binghe manages as well, and Ning Yingying *technically* succeeds but her sword- named Mo Liqin- does a weird little wobble every time she gets distracted that reminds Shen Yuan of someone doing the wave.

“... good enough,” Ming Fan decides, standing on his own sword, Yin Tian. It looks oddly dull and gray, but has a bright red tassel that clashes horribly with the rest of it.

Oh, tassels. Shen Yuan needs to figure out what fits Fu Yue best, doesn’t he? Something *cool,* obviously, but not as blatant as the one on Ming Fan’s sword and–

“Yuan,” Binghe says, giving his hand a tug.

Ming Fan and Ning Yingying are already halfway down to the lake, sword floating next to Ning Yingying. Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe hurry to catch up, floating their respective swords beside each other as they do and grimly prepare for the worst.

What follows is the most awful thing ever.

He would rather not go into details.

All that matters is that by the end of it, they all lay like drowned corpses by the rocky shore of the lake. Sprawled and gasping, soaked to the very bone and shivering apart at the seams.

Ming Fan pokes at Luo Binghe with his foot.

Luo Binghe doesn’t even twitch.

“Good enough for a first try,” Ming Fan says, even though they all fell down at least ten times each and then had to fucking figure out how to get their swords *back from the bottom of the lake.* Turns out it’s hard to channel qi when you can’t actually *see* your sword and you’re not used to it! Who knew! “Don’t try to fly back, we are walking. This one will of course let you all change clothes back at the peak before we move onto sword signs.”

Shen Yuan, who had been doing a very good job of suffocating himself against the cold, hard ground, turns his face so he can glare furiously at Ming Fan.

“We are walking back? Like this?” he asks in between gasps for breath.

Ming Fan sniffs.

“Obviously. It’s how it’s done.”

“I’m going to die,” Ning Yingying sobs.

“Xiao-shimei is not going to die,” Ming Fan says even as he begins to help her sit up, “this shixiong didn’t! Come now, up you go, we have too much to do to slack off–”

Shen Yuan shares a look of horror with Luo Binghe. Or what little he can see anyway- somewhere in the mess, Binghe’s hair got free and now he looks like a curly haired version of the ring girl, one sole eye visible.

Ming Fan shows absolutely no sympathy besides helping Ning Yingying sit up, despite her cries for mercy. The merciless efficiency is a new thing that Shen Yuan decides he hates.

With some struggle, they all manage to get back to their feet. Shen Yuan knows he is mostly fueled by pure petty energy; if Ming Fan speaks the truth, the bastard *did* walk all the way back to Qing Jing after such a hellish exercise. That means Shen Yuan can’t let him fucking win, and neither can Luo Binghe. By the grim look on his friend’s face, they are of one mind in this.

Ming Fan decides to be an evil bastard, though. More than he had already been.

He sits on his own goddamn sword and floats lazily in front of them the entire walk back. Telling them to hurry up, that they had to get back before lunch or they wouldn’t get to eat and–

Ass!!! Hole!!!

Whenever they do not have to train, Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe go to their tree. It is a welcome respite after the horrors of a Ming Fan in charge. Half of the time they don't even have the energy left to climb it, instead ending up by the roots and resting against each other as much as they lean against the large trunk of it.

The crown of the tree is thick with leaves; enough so that Shen Yuan wonders if it would work as an umbrella for them. If even a single drop of water could get through the green roof above.

He blinks, and the blue glow of the System hovers above him. It lingers there, and Shen Yuan stares for a moment at it. The way it stays right there, the mission title in loud letters. The *Accept?* so very obviously outlined, just in case he might miss it.

Shen Yuan looks away.

"I heard it's going to take a few days of travel to get there," he says and shuffles a little to get more comfortable, rolling an apple between his hands. Binghe got them one each from the kitchen. They are red with streaks of green and yellow and yet bigger than what he would have expected in such a timeline.

But there is the peak of agriculture, after all. Perhaps everything they grow could be found in a modern supermarket.

"Mn," Luo Binghe nods, the soft crunch as he bites into the fruit loud with the silence around them, "Shijie said we will ride on horses."

"That's so dumb," Shen Yuan grumbles and takes a bite of his own, the tart sweetness of it almost shocking in how *much* it tastes. He chews noisily before he finally swallows, "Ming-shixiong is training us and for what? We're just going to sit on horses the whole way? Chang Zhe city doesn't even seem big enough for a market."

"Actually," Binghe says, "it's plenty big."

Shen Yuan squints at him. Binghe smiles and takes another bite.

"Have you been there?"

"My mother was from there," Binghe says, absently giving his pendant a tug. Shen Yuan's eyes flick down to it before he can help himself, "before she… she had to leave."

To find work. To find a place where she could raise Binghe.

He doesn't say that, of course. Neither of them does. Luo Binghe has only spoken briefly of his mother throughout the time they have known each other- often in longing whispers, clutching the Guanyin pendant when he does.

Shen Yuan has been told of how hard she worked, how she was sick and died when he wasn't

there. He hasn't told Shen Yuan about the congee, or how his mother chose to move to the town closer to Cang Qiong Mountain in the hopes that her son would one day join the sect. Those little tidbits are things he remembers from reading.

"Oh," Shen Yuan says instead, unsure what else to do.

"... where is Yuan from?"

"Me?"

"Mhm."

"I'm from…" Shen Yuan pauses, "I don't actually remember," he admits and plays with the stem of the apple, breaking it off and flicking it away. "It was big? A lot of carts. I had to- I hid in one of them. The carts. But I can't remember the name of the city."

It had just never seemed important. And the System had pointed him in the right direction to go, like a compass aimed straight at Cang Qiong Mountain.

Luo Binghe of course doesn't need more details. He, out of anyone, knows about the faded brand on the back of Shen Yuan's neck and has definitely picked up on more thanks to his awesome protagonist brain.

"I'm glad Yuan made it here," Binghe says.

Shen Yuan smiles back and bumps his shoulder against Binghe's.

"Me too," he replies.

"Has Shixiong been out on missions before?"

Ming Fan stops where he is sorting through scrolls; he looks at Shen Yuan, eyes sharp and suspicious.

"Of course this one has," he says, "why would Shidi think otherwise?"

"This one is just curious," Shen Yuan replies and looks back down at the book in his hands. Shen Qingqiu is a selfish man and only lets Shen Yuan read through one book every month, at least of the ones that a Qing Jing Peak Lord needs to know by heart. This one is about war strategies.

It's pretty boring, but after Shen Qingqiu verbally *murdered him* for reading 'too much about demons' and 'spreading bad influence' when Shen Yuan had *dared* to say demons had culture too-

It just kind of seemed safer to read a boring book. Just in case Shen Qingqiu truly would hide every single book on demons as he had threatened.

"Shizun does right by ensuring we can handle ourselves out there," Ming Fan says, "and is very kind to come along and ensure the mission won't fail despite the fact we will have-"

He cuts himself off.

Shen Yuan looks at him and raises one brow.

"Have what?" he innocently asks.

Ming Fan scowls at him.

"Untested disciples," the older boy says, in a way that clearly says he badly wanted to use a far ruder word for it. Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. Just say you don't want normies, asshole! Or whatever else they could be called. N00bs? Oh shit, that's such an old word, isn't it? Fuck.

"We will be very careful and follow all the rules and ride on the horses all the way to the city, even though we have swords," Shen Yuan says, just a bit too sarcastic to be respectful.

"As if you could ride your sword all the way there," Ming Fan huffs and grabs the last scroll he needs, except then he just- stops.

He looks at Shen Yuan in a really weird way.

Resisting the temptation to hide behind the thick tome in his hands, Shen Yuan instead narrows his eyes in suspicion.

"What?" he asks.

"You shouldn't wander too far in Chang Zhe," Ming Fan says, slow and reluctant as he looks away, frowning heavily, "the… the Zhao family have a silk store there."

Shen Yuan stills.

"Oh?"

"Yes. And also Shidi would get into trouble," Ming Fan adds brusquely, turning his back to Shen Yuan, "you're too clumsy to be let off the mountain, Shizun is too kind to you. This one has seen how you trip on *air,* it's ridiculous. So it's important that you stay close during the mission! Understood?"

Shen Yuan stares down at the book.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

“Do you… do you still speak with him?” he asks.

He looks up in time to see Ming Fan stare down at the scrolls in his arms, the way he clutches at them just hard enough they are at risk of wrinkling. The silence that settles feels cold and awkward. Important, somehow, and so Shen Yuan waits.

“... no,” Ming Fan finally says, “of course not.”

“Really?”

“We- we were close,” Ming Fan says, slow and halting, words a stutter in his throat even as they come out perfectly even, “our families often traded and we shared the same tutor in writing. But this one would not dishonor Shizun in such a way.”

Not again, goes unsaid.

“So stop asking,” Ming Fan then snaps, hiking the scrolls up into a more secure grip, “don’t assume things!”

“I’m not! I’m not, promise.”

Ming Fan scoffs, but it’s a harmless thing. Shen Yuan watches as he leaves, and he feels–

Well, Shen Yuan doesn’t know what the fuck to feel. It’s fine, is what it is. It’s a good thing to know, and he knows that the guy wouldn’t fucking *lie* about that. He cares too much about Shen Qingqiu’s opinion.

Shen Yuan looks back at the System window and its damn mission. He thinks about Shang Qinghua speaking about hints, and he thinks about running into Zhao De while chasing some weird monster.

He shudders and tries to go back to reading.

Shen Yuan never actually saw animals in his first life.

Big ones, that is. He saw whatever one could see in a big city; dogs, cats, birds and even rats. He never *really* saw where, say, a porkchop came from. Shen Yuan never even went into any of the markets that showed off living things like squids and lobsters. Rich boy with a weak

constitution didn't really match the environment of fish guts and squawking chickens. His little sister had a horse girl phase, though, so he knew what horses were supposed to look like.

The horses he saw in this world were always smaller than he expected, with shaggy fur and vaguely donkey-like. They *looked* like an old breed of horses, practical and just big enough to be useful. Still awfully big for someone who was twelve and younger, of course.

Shen Yuan stares at the horses that have been saddled and prepared for the disciples of Qing Jing Peak, their hooves making very hoof-like noises against the stable courtyard of Xi Jiao Peak.

He stares in disbelief.

Even the fucking *horses* looks like cultivators, Shen Yuan thinks as a black one sniffs at his hand, velvet soft nose nuzzling at his palm in a really weird but somehow endearing way.

They are bigger than the horses he has seen in the towns below. Their legs are longer, their *everything* is longer. Shen Yuan tries to remember all the horse breeds his sister rambled about, what horse *she* wanted, and maybe- arabian horse? Was that a thing? Not *quite* there, but similar, maybe, just in how tall and slender they are.

Shen Qingqiu comes to a stop near him, his stare strong enough that Shen Yuan can feel it. He glances towards the man as he awkwardly pets the horse.

Shen Qingqiu idly fans himself as their eyes meet.

"You haven't ridden before," he says.

"Maybe this one has, actually," Shen Yuan replies, but the look of pure judgment he receives in turn makes his cheeks heat. He sees Binghe getting whacked in the face by a horse tail and has to bite back a laugh.

"Do not try to save face before this master," Shen Qingqiu says and moves past, "and do *not* name the horse."

"They don't have *names?"* he says, feeling deeply offended on his horse's behalf. It's so nice! Nuzzling his hand! How could no one give it a fucking *name?* They're going to carry them for days! Shen Yuan looks into its deep brown eyes and silently decides to name it Bao, because it's beautiful and he is maybe just a little bit hungry and knows that Binghe has prepared that for the road like the overachieving protagonist he is.

Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

"They tend to die," he says and enters his carriage.

Whatever face Shen Yuan makes seems to have alerted Binghe; his friend is by his side immediately, leading a white horse and looking terribly worried.

“Yuan?” he asks, “are you alright? What did Shen- what did Shizun say?”

“I’m going to defend Bao with my *life,”* Shen Yuan says, hugging Bao’s face when the horse buffs at him.

Luo Binghe blinks; and then he smiles.

“You named it Bao?”

“Of course! They deserve names, Binghe, we can’t just- just ride them and bring them to a dangerous mission and then not *name them.”*

“Ah, I heard it’s because they…” he trails off. Shen Yuan glares furiously at him, daring him to finish that sentence. Luo Binghe clears his throat. “Bao is a nice name,” he says instead, and Shen Yuan nods decisively.

“Yingying is going to name this one Mooncake,” Ning Yingying says as she leads over a brown horse with a blonde mane- why is it *blonde?*- and pats its nose.

“It’s not even Autumn,” Shen Yuan huffs.

“Mooncake,” Ning Yingying firmly repeats, and before Shen Yuan can figure out what to even say to that, she turns to Binghe, “A-Luo, what will you name yours?”

“Ah, um,” Binghe’s cheeks go pink as he looks at the white horse standing placidly by him, “this one… would not feel worthy to name it…?”

“Lotus, like A-Luo’s hairpin!”

“Shijie can’t just name *Binghe’s* horse for him! That’s rude, Shijie-”

“Didn’t A-Yuan say they deserve names? This one is only helping! And besides–!”

Shen Yuan had hoped that Ming Fan’s reign of terror would have ended with the start of travel.

No luck!

Ming Fan leads them away from camp; the weather is nice enough that none of the other disciples are bothering with a tent, and Shen Yuan has a suspicion that Shen Qingqiu has no

plans to eat, sleep and, if possible, to avoid leaving his carriage at all. So preparing camp appears to be mostly placing out protective arrays and arguing over who will be in charge of cooking.

As the others do that, the head disciple of Qing Jing Peak leads them all just far away enough that they are still within sight- not hard, as they camped near a meadow of suspiciously bright blue flowers that truly *are* harmless, as sus as they look- and turns to them.

He clears his throat and puts one hand behind his back.

"Sword glares," he says, and Shen Yuan stands up straighter, clutching at the hilt of Fu Yue. He can feel the quiet excitement from the sword, a gentle tug of strings around his fingers, "we will practice them now! You are good enough for flying short bursts, your swordsmanship is *acceptable-"* bullshit, Binghe is better than most people older than him! *Including Ming Fan!!!* "And so are your sword signs. But Shizun has informed this disciple to ensure you are capable of making a sword glare and also to control it."

Ming Fan points.

"Xiao-shimei, aim a sword glare there. Does Shimei know how to make one?"

"Yes, shixiong," Ning Yingying says as she walks up. She unsheathes Mo Liqin, its handle wrapped in bright orange to match her ribbons, the blade itself having weird little squiggly lines going down it.

Ming Fan moves back just a bit; Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe do the same, arms brushing as they stick close together.

"What color do you think it will be?" he whispers to Binghe.

"Orange," his friend replies, and Shen Yuan snorts a laugh.

"I can still *hear you–!"*

"Concentrate, Shimei."

"Yes, shixiong," Ning Yingying grumbles and steadies herself. They watch as she takes a deep breath, scrunching up her face as she concentrates. And then she does a swipe through the air, Mo Liqin cutting through it.

The glare is not orange; it is a vibrant green like the bamboo of Qing Jing, cutting through the air and lopping off a single branch of a nearby tree. Ning Yingying *squeals* and bounces, her ribbons and braids bouncing with her as she does.

"I did it!"

"Good job," Ming Fan praises, "repeat it two more times! Make it a little stronger, but Shimei's range was good!"

Ning Yingying beams proudly.

Once she has done it twice more, managing to make the sword glare a brighter and more solid green each time, Ning Yingying bounces back. Shen Yuan barely manages to avoid her as he shuffles to the side, wishing she would at least sheathe her sword *before* she skips up to people.

“Luo Binghe,” Ming Fan then says, tone flat, “do the same.”

What is *with* Qing Jing Peak favoritism? Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose at the head disciple, but Luo Binghe only offers a nod and moves forward.

When he unsheathes Zheng Yang, it’s in one smooth motion. He stands perfectly, the sword catching the sunlight in an artistic glint. Luo Binghe’s hair is tied up into a ponytail, the braids Shen Yuan put in that morning neatly tied into it. He looks *cool,* in that badass focused way only the protagonist can look. His eyes glimmer like a dark lake.

Luo Binghe does a quick, sharp motion and a burst of golden energy shoots forward. It digs into the ground in a narrow slash, like an explosion of sunlight.

“... *adequate,”* Ming Fan says through gritted teeth. Shen Yuan smiles smugly at him, but Ming Fan very obviously ignores him. “Again!”

Luo Binghe repeats it; each time more perfect than the last, though Ming Fan remains stingy with his praise and spends most of the time pretending he isn’t chugging vinegar. By the time Luo Binghe returns, Shen Yuan can’t help but grab his hand and give it a squeeze.

“Good job,” he says, and Luo Binghe brightens. Maybe his friend needed the praise more than he thought? “You had *perfect* form, Binghe!”

“Thank you, Yuan,” Binghe replies and gives his hand a squeeze back.

“Shidi,” Ming Fan huffs, “this is not *hand-holding* training! Step up!”

“Yes, shixiong,” Shen Yuan says and turns his head to roll his eyes, only Binghe catching it. His friend grins and gives his hand a last squeeze before letting go.

Shen Yuan walks forward and is totally not nervous. Nope! His hands are suddenly not sweaty, thank you very much! He got this. He is *good* with qi, and Fu Yue sings softly as he carefully unsheathes it. A gentle encouragement in that strange, old way it has.

He takes a deep breath.

Shen Yuan pushes his qi into the sword; he can feel how it flows down the blade like water and how Fu Yue hums with it. He readies himself. Pauses, then shifts his foot slightly more outward and hopes that he is doing a passable job.

When he swings Fu Yue, he for a moment fears that there won't be a glare at all. But the blade tugs at his soul like when they first met, a reassuring presence. The sweep of the movement reaches its end, and a shimmering silver bursts forward.

And it does *shimmer;* it is not an explosion of gold nor the sharp cut of green that Ning Yingying made. It is more like moonlight made into water as it rushes forward, cutting through the bright blue flowers, starting sharp and narrow and ending like a wide arc. It's almost cone-shaped.

Shen Yuan blinks.

Oh shit, he thinks, giddy, the System's voice is a distant thing he can ignore as it rewards him with B-points, *oh shit,* he has an AoE attack! That's so fucking cool!!!

"Good," Ming Fan says, eyeing the shape it left in the meadow, "do it again, but try and narrow it into a straight line."

"Yes, shixiong," Shen Yuan says and repositions himself, biting back a smile as he tries to focus.

He doesn't manage to cut the ground like Binghe, nor does he cut off any branches. It takes four tries in total before he manages to narrow it down into a straight-forward slash rather than the spread-out attack at the start.

Shen Yuan tries his very best to not bounce like Ning Yingying when Ming Fan finally offers praise. But they all still share giddy smiles behind Ming Fan's back as he leads them towards the camp once more.

Maybe, Shen Yuan thinks later that night, watching the stars above, *maybe* the mission won't be too bad. Maybe he can click on that *Accept* button. He has Fu Yue and Binghe and even Shen Qingqiu, who wouldn't stoop so low as to lose a disciple on a practice mission.

Shen Yuan blinks and the blue of the System hovers above him, waiting with a disturbingly expectant air. Shen Yuan flicks his eyes around; Ning Yingying is half-sprawled out of her bedroll. Luo Binghe is so close their elbows brush whenever Binghe shifts in his sleep.

The carriage has a soft glow shining from its windows; Shen Yuan can see the outline of Shen Qingqiu, posed as if reading.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath.

He clicks on *Accept.*

(Quest: Phantasmal Forces has been successfully accepted. We wish you a swift success!)

Chapter End Notes

LBH: who knows what nefarious things Shang-shishu does towards Yuan... this cannot stand!
SQQ: I will not let that rat be alone with Shen Yuan.
Both, realizing they just agreed on something: *shudders*
SQH: why am I hearing boss music?

This chapter is a bit slow, but don't worry guys :D
Things will happen :D
(still not sick! crossing fingers I remain free of it!)

And there is fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I'll skip descriptions for fanarts! And I need to start removing the early chapters ones, so please, go back to previous chapters to find the links for those!
Also if you have made fanart, please tell me! I only use tumblr. So if you use twitter or anything else, I will likely miss it D:
I'm Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 9: (new!)
Hipolish

Chapter 10:
Lady Dysnomia
Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Frummpets!
Anqelbean
Starry-stan-blog!
Creafanee

Chapter 12:
Starry Stan Blog
Liathcat

Chapter 13:
magnes-io

Chapter 14:
Lady Dysnomia
Frummpets
Anqelbean
A Shy Friend's Art

And these aren't chapter specific but ahhhh art!!!

sfwclwn
The Bullies
The Trio!
Anqelbean

It's so fun to see what people make out of such vague descriptions! Perhaps I should've described ZD and CWY in more detail to make it easier but gosh creativity comes through once more!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Boy sits before him.

He can hear him move, restless and childish. An incompetence that should have been trained out of him; to sit still should be a *simple* task for a cultivator. Meditation is a necessity. A practice that even Shen Qingqiu's *dear* teacher bothered to train him in well before he arrived at Cang Qiong Mountain. And yet, the sounds of Shen Yuan shifting in his seat is loud within the carriage. The brush of fabric, the light tapping of fingers against wood.

Shen Qingqiu turns a page.

"... are you ignoring me?"

"Did this one give disciple Shen permission to speak?"

The boy huffs. Shen Qingqiu does not need to look up to know that the boy has slumped down against his seat.

"Do not fuss," Shen Qingqiu says, "it is unbecoming."

"You're unbecoming," Shen Yuan mutters. He yelps when there is the sharp sting of a fan against his knee. Shen Qingqiu watches as the boy scrambles as far away as he can from him, the carriage offering little room for such a thing. Shen Yuan ends up in the far corner, glaring furiously.

How frightening, he sarcastically thinks, and flips open his fan.

"Has the road made you forget the importance of respect?" Shen Qingqiu asks, "or perhaps it is the little beast. Shall this master ensure that distance is kept during our travels, now when there are no seats to assign you?"

Shen Yuan flushes red; an unbecoming color. The child needs to learn control. His face is far too expressive, a flaw waiting to be exploited.

"That's unfair," the boy says, glaring still.

"This master decides what is fair."

He keeps eye contact; he does not yield until Shen Yuan folds, the boy averting his gaze to glare at the curtains covering the window. Outside, the disciples will see nothing but their silhouettes. Night is approaching.

“I do not want you to be distracted and bring shame during this endeavor,” Shen Qingqiu says, “if the beast makes it difficult, this master *will* ensure you do not so much as *breathe* in each other’s direction. Is this understood?”

“... I wouldn’t do it intentionally.”

“Intent does not matter. Results do. Is this *understood?”*

Shen Yuan sits tense; coiled, fingers digging into his uniform. Finally, he offers a stiff nod. A reluctant surrender which Shen Qingqiu knows better than to trust.

The child *will* cause trouble. It is a simple fact. Every day does the boy stumble upon it, as if possessed by a spirit of misfortune. At the sect, it is a flaw which he can mock him for.

Outside, it is one that may become fatal.

“Good,” Shen Qingqiu says.

For a moment, there is silence. The boy relaxes bit by bit, rippling water returning to stillness. Shen Qingqiu considers returning to reading. It is *necessary* to know what might be ahead.

It is also boring.

“But Ming-shixiong did say there was a market,” Shen Yuan then says, and Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

“And what would *you* do there? A disciple of your rank can hardly do more than act pathetic at such things. Vendors will not offer their wares for free.” Not even to cultivators; most especially not to *disciples,* who earned nothing and were not yet trusted alone.

“Gege gave this humble one coin,” Shen Yuan says oh-so-casually.

Shen Qingqiu snaps his fan closed.

“Do not call him that.”

“Gege likes it,” Shen Yuan says, and whatever respect he had remembered is once more gone; sand slipping through fingers, a fruitless endeavor. Shen Qingqiu wants to *strangle* him. The boy looks far too smug for his own good.

“Yue Qingyuan is not here,” Shen Qingqiu hisses, “this master is. Watch your tongue.”

“... were Shizun ignoring this one before?”

“This master was teaching an insolent whelp some *patience.”*

“Shizun were the one to-”

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes; the brat shuts his mouth, for once using that head of his for some self-preservation.

“I tire of your company,” he says, “so we shall cleanse your meridians now. Do *not* talk back.”

The boy grumbles, but otherwise remains silent as he moves towards Shen Qingqiu’s side of the carriage. Turning so that he sits with his back to him, the boy stares at the covered windows.

Shen Qingqiu truly does not care for watching a face so similar to his own *pout.* It is an insult, but one he can’t remove. Perhaps, he thinks wryly, he should have accepted the request to eliminate a Skinner demon instead. Perhaps the creature could have flayed the boy and given him a new face in turn, finally ending the gossip surrounding them.

He presses his hands to the boy’s back.

It does not take much thought. A year does much for familiarity, the child’s spiritual veins used to Shen Qingqiu’s qi. This is the longest they have not done so; but now with only a day’s travel left before they reach Chang Zhe city, it seemed prudent to ensure the boy’s veins had not tied themselves into knots.

There is strain.

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes as he traces it. He smooths it out and ignores the way Shen Yuan twitches. The foolish child can handle it; the strain is minor and ridiculous, something that meditation should have healed on its own. It is not Shen Qingqiu’s problem if the boy prefers to have it forcibly flattened by the cleanse, it is not his fault that the boy has neglected the mere basics.

“Meditation,” he orders once he removes his hands, once Shen Yuan moves back to the other side of the carriage, facing him. Neither likes to be crowded. That, at least, they share. “Before you rest, as well as in the morning.”

He flicks his gaze towards the sword that rests against the carriage’s door. Children are not trusted with qiankun pouches. The sword is nearly too long for such a skinny creature; however, experience has taught him that the swords always somehow know how tall their wielders will grow.

Except for Xuan Su. It looks ridiculous next to Yue Qingyuan.

“Meditate with that,” he says, offering a nod towards it, “grow your bond. You may inform Ning Yingying as well.”

“... and Binghe?”

“Yes,” Shen Qingqiu says, and before the child can reach for the door, he continues, “we

arrive tomorrow. Any who wander off by themselves *will* be punished. Is this understood?"

"Yes, Shizun," Shen Yuan says in the most insolent tone. Shen Qingqiu whacks the fan against his knee once more and offers a cold smile when the boy yelps.

"Dismissed," he says, and Shen Yuan glowers furiously before he scrambles out, nearly falling face-first to the ground before the door closes.

Such incompetence.

Shen Qingqiu's lips twitch upwards. He ignores it in favor of picking up the book once more, returning to where he left off.

From a distance, Chang Zhe city vaguely resembles a snake.

It is long and winding as it follows the Luo river, swelling in the middle with what Shen Yuan suspects is the market place which Ming Fan mentioned. It is such a strange layout for a city- he wonders if Airplane designed it to be so, but that seems doubtful. He can't remember the city being named in *Proud Immortal Demon Way* at all.

Shen Qingqiu does not exit his carriage as they reach the gates. Ming Fan is instead the one to ride forward and offer proof of their identities and purpose, and that is it. The gates open and they are free to enter.

The main street is wide and busy, Chang Zhe city more popular for trade than Shen Yuan thought it would be. People crowd together, carriages filling up space as they pass through. Already there are vendors yelling for attention, encouraging those who pass by to stop and inspect their goods.

But everyone makes room for what is the undeniably (tastefully) fancy carriage Shen Qingqiu lurks within, even more so when they recognize the sign of cultivators in the disciples riding around it. It feels real fucking weird to ride down streets and watch people throw themselves out of the way before they are anywhere within range, the way Shen Yuan remembers avoiding something similar.

Even weirder is watching *fancy* people very politely avoid so much as accidentally brushing against them as they pass, people that Shen Yuan just knows would have kicked him for being in the way two years ago.

Wow, being a cultivator just gives you automatic Respect.

The other disciples don't seem weirded out by it- but then again, everyone else are from fancy, rich families and Ning Yingying exists purely to be a delightful gremlin that, according to the novel, will be the first one to get kidnapped and trigger the mission plot. At least Binghe seems as morbidly fascinated as he is, which helps Shen Yuan pretend his heart is *not* beating like it's about to run for its life.

It's just that he kind of. Forgot? How many people exist in the world? And how *crowded* it can get in places like these. Two years of Qing Jing Peak and the lack of people shouting, shoving and just being *there* was apparently enough for him to lose his Big City Boy Creds. Not that he had much of it to begin with in this world, he was kind of mostly stuck at–

A scream cuts through the air.

Shen Yuan jumps; Bao remains calm, as do the other horses. But as one, the disciples of Qing Jing Peak turn their heads to stare as a woman screams out of what seems to be pure rage at a man. The man seems calmer, his arms crossed and smirking sleazily from beneath his hood as the woman grows increasingly more hysterical, yelling about things that makes them all blush, because *wow.*

Way to hang out your dirty laundry, holy shit.

As they ride past, Shen Yuan twists to keep track of them, only to meet the glare of Ming Fan.

"Eyes forward," the head disciple reminds him in a snotty tone, and Shen Yuan feels his cheeks heat as he does as told.

The profanities and dirty secrets follow them for far too long, all of them pretending they can't hear the woman's voice grow hoarse before, finally, they are out of hearing range. Shen Yuan shudders.

"I could *never* say all that in public," he tells Binghe, riding as close as they can get away with, "she must have been very mad."

"Her face must be very thick," Binghe agrees, "though it sounded like he deserved to be yelled at."

"Oh, for *sure.* He left her with a baby and went and made a new family? Who *does* that!? It reminds me of that book, you know-"

"Didn't Yuan say that book was bad? Unreadable? Needed to be thrown into a fire and given funeral rites to ensure it would never return?"

"Of course, but I still had to finish reading it, Binghe!"

"Stop talking," Ming Fan hisses at them as he passes, "you are disciples of Cang Qiong Mountain!"

Ugh.

“Sorry, shixiong,” they reply in unison.

Ming Fan huffs at them and rides ahead.

The Singing Dragon is a noticeably fancy place. It has balconies and young, beautiful women serving the rich dinner guests and strong, young men to carry luggage to whatever room a noble may have rented. There are fresh flowers artfully placed around the place.

Fresh flowers.

Shen Yuan is, like, ninety-nine percent sure that has to be expensive as fuck in a city like this. Not that he gets to ask- they are assigned their rooms after having stabled the horses, Shen Qingqiu gives whatever orders he needs to give and then he goes and lurks in his room much like he had lurked in the carriage the entire way.

Shen Yuan is starting to wonder if the Scum villain has agoraphobia. It would *not* be the most surprising thing, honestly, and makes him feel just a little bit bad. Dude’s pride is forcing him out into a world he clearly hates, all because he probably got some kind of weird-ass idea that people will use it against him somehow.

The source material *and* the Shen Qingqiu he has gotten used to sure do have an unhealthy amount of paranoia.

Ming Fan rounds them all up; Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying end up in the middle of their combined group of eight disciples as they begin to walk towards their destination. Every attempt to weasel himself out of it ends up with either Binghe tugging him back or one of their shixiongs just straight-up body blocking Shen Yuan. He would be offended, but they do the same thing to Ning Yingying.

Ugh, they are *babysitting them.*

They have swords now! Come *on* guys! But he stops trying to break out. At least it means he can just pretend there aren’t actually a lot of people around them, that they are all just on their way to another brutal sword training session or the even more brutal calligraphy lesson. He lets Binghe hold his hand and focuses on the firm grip of it.

“We are visiting the latest victim,” Ming Fan explains as they walk, “an elder who died shortly before we left the mountain. Shizun wants us to inspect the body for any hints as to what killed him and to then use those clues to catch the creature that did it. No one is allowed

to be alone! You will be respectful and listen to me! Shizun *only* wants to be disturbed if there is an emergency."

"Yes, shixiong," they all reply, and Shen Yuan wonders if he could get away with sticking his tongue out. It's not like Ming Fan is looking.

They arrive at what must be a very fancy home in such a crowded city, with a tiny little garden to walk through to reach bright red, heavy doors that open up into a wide greeting hall.

As Ming Fan greets their host (who appears disappointed that Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu didn't show up because they don't know when to be grateful), Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and pulls up the System.

The blue window hovers before him, unseen to all but him.

(Quest: Phantasmal Forces is currently active! Does Host require assistance?)

"What can you tell me about it?" he asks, tugging at his sleeves, bunching them up in his hands, free from the view of everyone but his fellow disciples.

It always feels weird, talking to the System and knowing no one can hear him do so.

(Phantasmal Forces is a beginner level quest! Host will be rewarded +500 B-points upon completion and is capable of earning more as the mission progresses!)

"Yeah, yeah, but what can you *tell* me? Like, what happened? You're… you're supposed to give hints, right? Airplane said- and, and you *have,* before…" Shen Yuan swallows. Tries again. "Hints about the mission? You can do that, can't you?"

(Host is a low-level character and does not have the rights to a detailed description of the mission.)

That is fucking bullshit, he wants to snap, but then Ming Fan's voice cuts through and Shen Yuan waves the System away in a quick swipe to smooth out imaginary wrinkles in his clothes.

They are led up way too fancy stairs and through a hallway lined with the kind of expensive pottery that would probably put a normal person in debt for life. Shen Yuan walks as carefully as he can, suddenly very aware that he is more clumsy than anyone in the entire world and unlike *Ouran Highschool Host Club,* he doesn't think these nobles would accept him joining some weird kind of high school harem as payment. Unless they would. Ew.

He blinks and they enter a room that is rich in the old kind of way. Shen Yuan takes a step closer to Binghe as they look around; the room is dark, only a few candles have been lit. Just enough that he can see talismans sticking to the walls, to the bed in the middle of the room.

They are the kind that ward off spirits and resentment. They are the kind of talismans that he

thinks they paid some rogue cultivator to put up, or perhaps a priest. To keep the body in good condition, to last until they arrived.

Shen Yuan realizes he is squeezing Binghe's hand too hard and lets go. He instead tucks his hands into his sleeves and forces himself to look at the body as Ming Fan inspects it.

The man who lays in bed is old; skin a strangely yellow hue from having been dead for days but unable to properly decay. His hair is long and laid out around his body in a shocking white. His eyes are still wide open. Did no one think to close them? That's rude, Shen Yuan thinks, nails digging into his own skin as he forces himself to look, find, search.

There is blood.

It is dried, but there is a lot. The Seven Apertures had burst in what must have been a truly shocking display of it; there was blood still clinging to his ears, staining his lips and nose and even the corner of his eyes. It's gruesome, despite the lack of any wounds.

"This man did not have white hair when he died," Ming Fan tells them, their host sobbing in the doorway, "so consider that another clue. Shizun always says it is best to learn by doing! So come closer and inspect the body properly. Do not touch."

Numbly, Shen Yuan walks forward.

It's not that he hasn't seen dead bodies before.

In this time period, in this world, that would be impossible to avoid. There is death everywhere and it would have been a strange thing if Shen Yuan had been able to make the trip to Cang Qiong Mountain without stumbling upon at least one body by the roadside.

He's just… not very good with it.

"System," he says, the blue window helpfully covering up the view of the body as he stands next to a shixiong by the name of Heng He, as he pretends to take it all in, "it's bullshit to not give me anything. Can I- can I activate a clue? Something that could help, even a little?"

(Would Host like to purchase Easy Mode for 100 B-Points?)

Shen Yuan does have the points for it, he knows that. But…

"Something cheaper?" he asks, feeling weirdly greedy for suggesting it.

(… Host can purchase a temporary increase in Energy Sensitivity for 50 B-Points. This would allow the user to detect clues for a limited amount of time that others cannot.)

"Deal."

"Are you *listening?"* Ming Fan snaps and Shen Yuan takes a step back, hands up as Ming Fan steps through where the System had just been, "this is why you are paired with me!

Honestly."

It is only then that Shen Yuan realizes that the others are leaving.

"What?" he says and grabs for Binghe's hand, not hard to do when the other boy was dragging his feet already, "wait, where are we going?"

"We are all splitting up into pairs," Ming Fan says, eyeing their hands in a way that makes Shen Yuan cling to it harder, "you are with me. Disciple Luo will go with Heng He."

"This one tried to ask to be with Yuan," Luo Binghe tells him, sending a fully disrespectful glare at Ming Fan, "but shixiong said no."

"This one is *not* letting two junior disciples be left alone! Especially not *you two."*

"Hey," Shen Yuan huffs, feeling very offended, "what does that mean?"

Ming Fan huffs back, much louder. He sounds very much like Bao when Shen Yuan wasn't allowed to feed him more oats.

"It means that the *beast-"*

"Don't call him that!"

"Fine! It means that disciple Luo needs to *leave.* And you! You weren't paying attention, so we are going to inspect the victim again!"

Shen Yuan grimaces, but there isn't much to do. Any more whining only makes Ming Fan's face a splotchy red and then there is Heng He, calmly leading a very slow Binghe away. Shen Yuan sighs and waves as Binghe sulks his way out, past the woman who Shen Yuan is starting to think might have been the dead guy's way too young wife. Like, she is an adult! For sure! But also???

"Shameful," Ming Fan mutters, and then he grabs Shen Yuan's arm and tugs him forward, way too close to the body for his comfort, "now, actually *look* before we leave."

Shen Yuan must be making a face because Ming Fan makes a grumpy one right back at him. Slowly, Shen Yuan looks at the body.

The dead man looks the same as before. Bloodied, old and dead.

Shen Yuan stares, wondering where the fuck his 'temporary upgrade' is, when is it supposed to kick in- he blinks. Shen Yuan sees the faintest of… motes? It almost looks like mold, black and purple and floating, but it's so faint that he can *barely* see it. It hovers there, drifting towards the door they entered.

"... this one has looked, shixiong," he says, and Ming Fan scoffs.

“And what did shidi *see?”*

“Um-” he tries to remember everything he read, from a previous life and this one because the System is of no fucking help, obviously, *that* has been established, “it’s a spirit? Not- maybe not a ghost, b-but a resentful spirit?”

Ming Fan frowns at him.

“Good enough,” he finally decides, and tugs on Shen Yuan’s arm again, this time towards the door. Shen Yuan squawks and nearly stumbles at the suddenness of it, but Ming Fan lets go before he can, “now hurry! We already wasted enough time.”

“...”

“Shidi is supposed to say *Yes Shixiong* after that, you know.”

“Yes, Shixiong,” Shen Yuan grumbles.

Ming Fan sniffs and keeps marching ahead.

As much as Shen Yuan hates it, he has to stick close.

Ming Fan is at least a familiar face. There is the absurd urge to grab his sleeve to make sure he doesn’t leave Shen Yuan behind, an urge he hurriedly sets on fire and pretends he never had. People try to avoid them, their cultivator robes still very much noticeable, but there is only so much one can avoid.

Rush hour, Shen Yuan thinks somewhat hysterically when Ming Fan has to yank him out of the way of a carriage, roughly dusting him off before they keep going.

“Are we going anywhere specific?” Shen Yuan dares to ask after a moment; he hasn’t seen any of the others from Qing Jing. It’s- weird. It feels odd, not seeing Ning Yingying or Luo Binghe. There is no bouncing little girl chattering nor Binghe as a steady presence next to him. It’s not like they are *always* together, of course.

It’s just that Shen Yuan would prefer to be around them right now. It’s a mission! Ning Yingying will for sure step into some plot point and he will fucking *miss it.* She won’t be in danger, Binghe’s first wife and childhood sweetheart can’t just *die.* But it’s unfair that he will miss whatever cool moment will happen.

“It’s a big city,” Ming Fan says, “I am *looking.* What, you think you can do so much better?

Why don't you try, then, huh?"

Shen Yuan scowls back.

"Fine!" he huffs, and he points down a different street, less crowded, "why not go there? Maybe we *won't* get pick-pocketed then!"

"As if a cultivator can get pick-pocketed," Ming Fan rolls his eyes, but to Shen Yuan's surprise, he does actually start going to that street. Maybe his shixiong actually hates the crowds too? It's good, though.

The motes are going that way.

The street still has people. But they can now walk on the side of it without being jostled. The embarrassing urge to grab sleeves fully disappears and Shen Yuan tries to instead track the motes.

Wow, so much easier without half of fucking China in the way!!!

"Did you say that the man's hair wasn't white before he died?" he asks as they walk, playing with the pommel of Fu Yue. It hums in that reassuring way it has. Shen Yuan looks at Ming Fan's sword and wonders what *that* bond is like. In the original, didn't Ming Fan envy Luo Binghe? Does that mean he doesn't have a good bond with his sword?

"Yes. Which means it's probably something that scared him to death," Ming Fan says, eyes wandering, "Shizun *did* say it's probably a curse, so it won't hurt *us,* of course. And only elders have died."

"So Shizun *is* helping?"

"No! Of course not, he doesn't have to do that. But of course I, as the head disciple, must know the details. Also, this one said all this before as part of the briefing. *You* weren't listening."

Maybe if you were less of a bitch, I would listen more, Shen Yuan thinks and doesn't say. The motes drift ahead, growing stronger. This street is less smooth; more bumpy, loose rocks that shift when stepped on. Residential area, maybe? Definitely not a rich one, if so.

"Watch it!" Ming Fan snaps at a man who rushed by so fast he knocked right into Ming Fan. The man then nearly falls over himself trying to bow in apology while still hurrying away. It looks like an absurd attempt at crabwalk and Shen Yuan feels a little bad about almost laughing, especially considering the face Ming Fan makes at the poor guy.

"Some people are not made to be around civilized people," Ming Fan complains, "there is a whole street! Acting like he was being chased, and yet there is no one chasing! Rude."

"Maybe he was running to a meeting? Maybe he is late to something?" Shen Yuan suggests. There is a split in the street; left and right, and he takes a step forwards to peer down the one

on the right. The motes drift from it, but it's kind of like they are affected by the *wind* suddenly, swirling. Which better not be the case, if Shen Yuan has to fight the fucking wind as well to solve this case before Ning Yingying steps on, like, a trapdoor that leads to an evil lair he *swears* he will steal all of her ribbons.

"Or maybe he was just rude and didn't realize that this one is a respected cultivator," Ming Fan says behind him and then he makes a noise; a choked inhale, as if Shen Qingqiu just caught him doing something dumb.

Shen Yuan, who has heard that sound more than once and *always* loved the result of it because it's always something embarrassing for the older boy, turns to see. But before he can, Ming Fan shoves him down the path he was already facing.

"Stop dragging your feet," Ming Fan hisses in an almost whisper, hand between Shen Yuan's shoulders as he practically pushes him forward, steps hurried, "we will never get this done otherwise."

"I wasn't," he protests and tries to twist to look behind them, "stop pushing me!"

"Stop *squirming!* Ugh, you're such a child," Ming Fan complains and then yanks him down another path, this one seeming to loop back to the main street. Fuck! No, not back to the damn crowd! "This is why Shizun wouldn't accompany us, he knew how bothersome it would be!"

"I'll bite you," Shen Yuan threatens.

The hand between his shoulders drops.

"You could *try,"* Ming Fan says and finally Shen Yuan can turn around. But there is nothing behind them- only people going about their day, a few children playing some kind of game. He frowns and looks at Ming Fan.

"Are you sick?" he asks, because Ming Fan looks like it; pale and clammy, the other boy looking at where they came, lips thin and face drawn. Shen Yuan's reward for showing concern is a mighty scowl.

"I have a golden core. I do not get *sick."*

"Mu-shishu said you can still get sick even with a golden core, you know. I asked."

"Maybe if one were a weak little baby like you!" Ming Fan snaps, and then the asshole gives Shen Yuan another shove. He really *will* bite him, damn it! "Keep moving, what are you doing, standing about? We are busy!"

"Wha- I was *not* the one who-"

"Move!"

Shen Yuan doesn't know what sound he makes, but it sure is one. He swats away Ming Fan's hands when the older boy shoves at him again, but he does move. The motes are thicker now, so they are on the right path! It's just that Ming Fan could stand to be less of a bitch about it!

Ming Fan does not stop being a bitch about it.

Multiple times, Shen Yuan starts to wander down side-streets where the trail of motes grow thicker. Every single time, Ming Fan lets him take a few steps only to abruptly change his mind and proceeds to yank Shen Yuan around like he is nothing but a ragdoll, scolding him for being such a *child,* for not listening. At one point Shen Yuan tries to stomp on his foot during it.

It only leads to Ming Fan tripping and taking them both down with him, his stupid body way heavier than Shen Yuan's, making him feel like a pancake.

The attempts to untangle and get back up probably doesn't look too dissimilar from the two feral cats trying to murder each other right next to them as it happens. The only difference is that Ming Fan has a nosebleed that the other boy proceeds to complain about. Loudly.

For forever.

They cross the main-street; cutting through, Shen Yuan is almost happy about it because the sounds of the crowd muffles Ming Fan's stupid whining until he can barely hear it.

Except, he realizes, he really *can't* hear it.

Shen Yuan reaches the other side of the street and finds himself alone.

Now, this should not be a problem. He is fourteen! With, like, an adult's memories. It is not the end of the world, being all alone. There are disciples running around everywhere trying to track down the thing that kills old people, so they will surely bump into him at some point. From here, he can *probably* find his way to The Singing Dragon.

It should be fine.

Shen Yuan stares out at the sea of people, fourteen years old and tall for his age but not *that* tall. He stares and he can't- there is not a sign of Ming Fan anywhere. He strains his ears, focuses on that cultivator hearing and utterly fails to differentiate voice from voice. There is just too much. He thinks, maybe, that his heart is beating too fast.

It is when his fingers itch and grow warm in a way they haven't for a whole year that Shen Yuan realizes he isn't breathing.

The reminder has him gulping for air as he backs up, stumbling, feeling like his stupid teenage legs are too long, his feet too big and his ribcage too small. Shen Yuan ducks into an alley and gasps for precious oxygen and squeezes his eyes shut. Breathe, he tells himself, and tries to remember the exercises that Mu Qingfang so diligently drilled into his head. *Breathe,* he thinks even harder and begins to count to ten as he sinks down to the ground.

Shen Yuan doesn't know for how long he sits there.

He keeps losing count; such a silly thing. Such a *stupid* thing, to not be able to count to ten. He keeps having to start over, fumbling the order as he clutches at his chest. Hopefully no one will find him. He doesn't- he doesn't want Binghe to see him like this, all hunched in a dirty alley and- he can't–

Shen Yuan starts over.

By the time he can finally breathe, he feels awful. Wrung out like wet laundry that still, somehow, refuses to dry. Shen Yuan coughs. Hiccups, and then laughs and presses the palm of his hands against his eyes until he sees stars.

"Fuck," he whispers.

Standing is a challenge. Legs wobbly, unwieldy. Shen Yuan claws his way up using the wall until he is finally on his own two feet. His breathing is still a stuttering mess, but it will have to do. He can't just- he can't *stay,* after all. That would be stupid. He's not *actually* fourteen.

Shen Yuan looks down the alley. It leads further down, to a different street. There are less people there. He wipes his clammy hands against his robes and forces himself to start walking.

"Shixiong!" he calls out, and pretends his whole face isn't warm when people glance his way, curious about the strange child in cultivator robes. He probably looks like he is one wrong breath away from throwing up. Shen Yuan *feels* like he is, anyway. "S-Shixiong!" he repeats, but there is no response.

There is, however, the motes.

Shen Yuan pauses. He watches as they drift ahead, the trail stronger than ever. He dares to comb his fingers through it, making it swirl. But it keeps drifting ahead of him.

He should wait for Ming Fan.

Instead, he finds himself following it.

Why shouldn't he, anyway? Waiting around won't do anything. So far there has been not a single point awarded. Maybe he *needs* to be alone.

Shen Yuan bunches the sleeves into his hands and turns down a corner and- stops. The motes drift ahead, like an ominous swarm of shadows. They drift down the dead-end he finds himself at, the shadows dark and overbearing with how the buildings around them seem to lean down, shielding the midday sun from ever casting its light onto this forgotten corner of Chang Zhe.

At the end, there is Ming Fan.

Pressed against the wall, his head bowed in a way that Shen Yuan doesn't think he has ever seen. Shen Yuan only recognizes him because of his uniform and the bright red tassel hanging from his sword.

For half a second, he thinks maybe Ming Fan is being robbed. Because he isn't alone. There is someone else cornering him, dark robes and a face tilted away. One hand is resting against the wall in a way that seems… odd. Caging Ming Fan in, but that makes no sense. They are cultivators. They can't just get *robbed.* And it's only one hand- the other isn't caging him in. It absurdly reminds him of the kabedon trope, an idiotic thing to remember and not at all suitable. Not with how Ming Fan is staring down at his shoes, face barely visible in the shadows but not showing anything good. Not with how he has one hand on Yin Tian.

Shen Yuan steps closer, heart beating faster.

"Were you avoiding me?" the person asks, and their voice tickles at his memories, makes his ribcage feel too small again, "did Shixiong not miss this one?"

"This one- this one isn't your Shixiong," Ming Fan says, his voice hoarse. The person chuckles. Male, Shen Yuan thinks, and grabs at Fu Yue's hilt. Ming Fan still hasn't looked up. He still hasn't noticed that Shen Yuan is there.

"That is true. And whose fault is that?"

Ming Fan shakes his head.

"Since when did you start protecting little mongrels?" the other guy asks, voice casually dreadful, hand raising to grab Ming Fan's chin, forcing him to look up and Shen Yuan freezes, because *what.* What is- what is going on– "I saw you lead him away. Didn't want me to put him in his place again? Or did you not want to see me? Is that it?"

"I can't- of course I wouldn't," Ming Fan stutters, hand letting go of his sword and grabbing nothing else, hovering instead uselessly in the air as the person leans in closer, "you were- you went too far, and you *know* it-"

"Did I? A-Fan, do you forget how much I always supported you? We were friends. *Best friends.* And don't think I didn't see how you looked at me."

Ming Fan looks like he is about to cry.

Shen Yuan can't move.

"Zhao De," Ming Fan says, "don't-"

"No one would have wanted you. You do know that, right?" Zhao De says, tilting his head in such a way that Shen Yuan can see his cold eyes. That smile, the one that always seems to think something is just a little bit funny. "I pitied you. I couldn't tell you, of course, that I would *never* touch you. I was your friend. Friends don't hurt friends."

“Stop.”

“But you did worse than that, didn’t you? You *betrayed me.”*

Ming Fan makes a strangled noise and shoves Zhao De away. The other boy laughs and lets him, moving back as if it was intentional. And then their eyes land on Shen Yuan.

For a moment, there is nothing but silence.

Zhao De raises a brow and smiles.

“Hello, shidi,” he says.

Shen Yuan can’t breathe.

And then Ming Fan grabs him; slings him onto one shoulder and Shen Yuan can’t do anything but let him, can’t look away even as Ming Fan *runs,* Zhao De giving them a little wave before he is out of sight, that cruel twist of his smile familiar and awful and–

He doesn’t know for how long Ming Fan runs.

But once the boy stops and lets him down, Shen Yuan struggles to let go of the other’s robes. He can’t- it’s- he had to hold on during the run. And now it’s- he can’t just- Ming Fan was, *Zhao De was–*

Shen Yuan lets go just in time to turn away and throw up.

“Fuck,” Ming Fan says, and Shen Yuan almost laughs.

Instead he tries to remember how to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

Zhao De: *handsome, charismatic, talented* Hey there! Let's become besties at this new sect we joined :)
Ming Fan, an anxious and lonely bisexual: oh no
Ming Fan, years later: oh NO!!!

Surprise!!!! Ming Fan likes girls AND boys. He just has terrible taste.
Guess who my favorite Qing Jing Disciple is! Hint: he is having an awful time <3

And there is fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I need to start removing the early chapters ones, so please, go back to previous chapters to find the links for those!
Also if you have made fanart, please tell me! I only use tumblr. So if you use twitter or anything else, I will likely miss it D:
I'm Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 9:
Hipolish

Chapter 10:
Lady Dysnomia
Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Frummpets!
Anqelbean
Starry-stan-blog!
Creafanee

Chapter 12:
Starry Stan Blog
Liathcat

Chapter 13:
magnes-io

Chapter 14:
Lady Dysnomia
Frummpets
Anqelbean
A Shy Friend's Art
NEW!!! Quest-draws

And these aren't chapter specific but ahhhh art!!!

sfwclwn
The Bullies
The Trio!
Anqelbean

It's so fun to see what people make out of such vague descriptions! Perhaps I should've described ZD and CWY in more detail to make it easier but gosh creativity comes through once more! And what else do you need to know than that Zhao De is just unfairly handsome/hot/evil?

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shizun stands by the window.

The warm light of noon makes him look like a true Immortal. Casting his frame in slanted gold, the white and green of Qing Jing Peak stained amber. His back is straight, his hands tucked into billowing sleeves. None has ever been more worthy of the Peak Lord title.

Ming Fan is kneeling.

The floor is hard. Normally this is not an issue, but after today, he shamefully would like something soft. He would of course *never* say such a shameless thing out loud! And yet, he feels like he is stewing in it, waiting for the words of the Lord of Qing Jing Peak. His knees hurt.

Shen Qingqiu's face is cold.

It reminds Ming Fan of a year ago, standing in a room with go pieces scattered across the floor, splinters digging into his hands from where a table had shattered. His Shizun had a similar face then. A holy statue, yet to decide on judgment but a promise that it would come.

Shen Yuan is outside; Ming Fan left him there, because obviously the brat wouldn't explain anything properly. He *never* does! Always rambling, focusing on the wrong details! No, Ming Fan is the head disciple and will handle this. Besides, he saw more. Shen Yuan was distracted for most of it and absent the rest. His report would be lacking. A waste of Shizun's time. Also, he looked like he would throw up. *That* was unacceptable. Shizun might actually kill him if he did such a thing! So Ming Fan had ordered the brat to wait outside and for once in his life, Shen Yuan had actually listened.

Ming Fan clutches at his pants.

Obviously, the green of Qing Jing was superior.

Zhao De had looked–

The yellow and white had been so strange, the cut of the robes different. Longer, less folded over each other. The outer robe tied in the back instead of the front. Ming Fan had seen Zhao De in them before, once, during a brief visit to his own family. Zhao De hadn't greeted him then.

Had offered nothing but a blank glance.

Shameful.

“And you do not know where he is now?” Shizun asks.

Ming Fan startles; he feels his cheeks heat, but Shizun mercifully makes no comment on how distracted he is.

“This one does not,” Ming Fan says and presses his brow to the floor, “this one apologizes, Shizun.”

“Hn.” There is the sound of a fan opening. Ming Fan does not look up. “Zhao De would be foolish to attempt an attack,” Shizun says, derision in his voice, “however, he was following you and disciple Shen.”

Ming Fan doesn’t know if he followed him or Shen Yuan. There is that awful, stupid and shamefully hopeful part deep inside that he is doing his best to ignore. It is an unbecoming thought to have. He thinks he will have to meditate *a lot* to be rid of it. It is something that makes no sense, anyway. He had certainly not *liked* turning a corner to see his- to see–

Ming Fan can feel a tremor in his back.

“Yes, Shizun,” he says because his thoughts are too unworthy to be voiced aloud. He is the head disciple! He does not need to burden Shizun with such things. Shizun would not want it, anyway. He is *far* too important for that.

“Revenge is a possibility. You are to travel in groups of four now. Do not,” Shizun continues, voice colder, “grow slack in your duties. This mission must be completed, and none of you have discovered anything of note. Zhao De is *not* the focus. Understood?”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“Dismissed.”

Ming Fan tries to stand up and finds he can’t.

His legs burn. He tries to push up with his arms, but the tremor he could feel in his back during the bow seems to have moved to all four of his limbs. He feels *heavy,* in a way he hasn’t in a long time until today, earlier, after he had grabbed the brat and ran until his legs nearly folded underneath him. It hadn’t disappeared but had softened into exhaustion once he and the brat began to make their way back to the inn.

But it’s back in full strength now and Zhao De was hours ago.

Ming Fan stares down at himself and the way his kneeling has turned into an undignified sprawl.

Slowly, Shizun turns to look at him.

“Having trouble?” Shizun asks from behind his painted fan, and Ming Fan feels sick with

shame.

“This one apologizes, Shizun,” he says and tries again but his legs just *slide* in such a way that his knees slam into the hard floor. He bites back the whimper of pain that wants to escape.

Finally, Ming Fan slumps.

“... this lowly one can’t,” he admits and hangs his head.

There is silence. And then there is the sound of Shizun walking closer, the soft steps of an Immortal cultivator who only makes sounds to be polite.

Ming Fan hasn’t been beaten as a punishment for nearly two years, but he understands if that ends now. This is ridiculous. He can’t even *stand,* what kind of head disciple is so weak? He shifts and tries to get back into a proper kneel once more.

The end of Shen Qingqiu’s robes enter his vision.

Ming Fan bows his head and waits.

“There is white in your hair,” Shizun says.

Ming Fan looks up.

“Shizun?”

Shen Qingqiu stares down at him, eyes narrowing into slivers of green.

“Where is disciple Shen,” he says, not asking.

“This one told him to wait outside,” Ming Fan says, and when Shizun turns towards the door, he can’t help but touch his hair. Obviously he won’t be able to feel it turning white, but also maybe he will. He doesn’t, though. His hair still feels normal. Why would it be white?

Why can’t he get up?

The door slides open.

“Inside,” Shen Qingqiu orders, and Ming Fan looks over his shoulder to watch the brat scramble to his feet from where he sat on the floor. He hasn’t even fixed his uniform! It’s still all askew from the running. Ming Fan scowls at him, willing the kid to read his mind and *fix his clothes,* but all he gets is a dumb stare back. Stupid.

“Ming Fan,” Shizun says, fan snapping closed, “hand.”

Ming Fan holds out his hand and pretends he doesn’t jump when Shen Qingqiu grabs his wrist. Shizun’s hand is cold, his fingers pressing against Ming Fan’s pulse.

“What’s happening?” Shen Yuan asks.

“Quiet,” Shizun says, as he should. Ming Fan doesn’t know what kind of nerve the brat has, speaking when Shizun is so clearly busy. And then Ming Fan’s hand is dropped, replaced with Shen Yuan’s in a quick grab that makes the boy yelp.

Soon, that too is dropped.

“Did Zhao De touch you?” Shizun asks Ming Fan, and he remembers a hand gripping his chin, forcing eye-contact he should have denied. *Shameful.*

“Yes, Shizun,” he says, “but not for long,” Ming Fan hurries to add as Shen Qingqiu’s face becomes drawn, as Shen Yuan fidgets like an idiot next to him. Ming Fan doesn’t reach over to slap his hands, even if they are picking at his sleeves in a very rude way, “only for a moment! And only this one!”

“Shen Yuan has no sign of drain,” Shizun says, fan unfurling, hiding his lower face from them. He stares at Ming Fan’s hair, which in turn makes the brat look as well. It takes a moment before Shen Yuan gasps. That must mean it’s not *that* much white, surely? Ming Fan doesn’t think his hair would do well with white. Not the right shade of brown, he knows, more muddy than chestnut, “which means he was not affected.”

Shizun turns his back to them.

“Assist Ming Fan to his room,” he orders, “rest until tomorrow. The drain appears temporary, so there will be *no* excuse to avoid work after rest. Is this understood?”

“Yes, Shizun,” Ming Fan says.

Avoiding work! He would *never.*
He does not say such things, of course. Shizun is right to ensure that everything continues as it should.

“Dismissed.”

Shen Yuan is just barely shorter than him. Ming Fan knows that the brat will grow taller, for he *is* Shizun’s son (although unclaimed) and Shizun is far taller than either of Ming Fan’s parents. But at this moment, the brat makes a good crutch to lean on as they exit the room, leaving Shizun to his thinking.

Ming Fan is glad that the others are still outside, finishing chores and practicing their sword forms in the courtyard. It is shameful to be hobbling down the hallway, clutching at Shen Yuan, who everyone knows can’t walk two steps before he trips on something.

When the boy inevitably drops him, Ming Fan does *not* want an audience.

Somehow, the brat succeeds in delivering Ming Fan to their shared room without doing so.

Four beds, not as extravagant as Shizun's. But of course they *are* only disciples. Ming Fan does not look forward to sharing a room with Shen Yuan and the little beast, but someone has to keep an eye on them. Ning Yingying, at least, sleeps through the night and can be trusted with the others.

Shen Yuan helps him sit down on the bed.

Ming Fan rubs at his thigh, tries to massage out the trembles in it. It feels like his muscles are tense and twisted, and he wishes he could simply dig his fingers into it and make it *right.* Of course, that would be very gruesome and not at all worthy of a Qing Jing disciple. But it does hurt, and he hates it.

"Are you alright?" Shen Yuan asks.

"Why are you still here?" Ming Fan huffs and drops his hands to the bed. He leans against the wall, barely able to sit upright, and eyes the brat.

Shen Yuan fidgets.

"This one was just- that is, considering… he… Zhao De-"

Ming Fan scoffs.

"This Shixiong won't let Zhao De get near you," he says, because *really.* He might be weak, but Shizun said it was temporary! And now Ming Fan is prepared. And he didn't let Zhao De get close to the brat, either, even when he *was* surprised. "And Shizun won't let him get away with anything, either."

"But he did something to you!" Shen Yuan blurts out, "and- and the way he spoke-"

"That is *not* your business!" Ming Fan snaps, but of course the brat only glares in response. Uncowed. Not unafraid, but just dumb enough to ignore the fear. He knows the brat claims they aren't related, but why *else* wouldn't Shizun have whipped him by now? The nerves! The rudeness! The disrespect!

"It might be," Shen Yuan huffs. Ming Fan wishes he could kick him, but his legs are so weak he doesn't know if he can even get his feet into the bed. Pathetic. "You don't know!"

"Zhao-ge wouldn't-"

"Zhao-ge!?"

"Shut up! Slip of tongue, shut up." Ming Fan's face is burning, "Zhao De isn't stupid, and Shizun has ordered us to move in groups of four now. It is *fine.* And fix your uniform, you are a mess and a disgrace to our sect."

Shen Yuan mutters a word that he should *not* know on a peak of scholars as he fixes his uniform.

“That is disgusting,” Ming Fan says, “and unseemly. Speak like you are from Qing Jing Peak, Shidi, not the *streets*. Where did you even hear that?”

“The streets,” Shen Yuan shoots back.

Ming Fan frowns at him.

“Go and do your chores. And don’t forget to meditate with your sword, Shizun told me to remind you. And don’t tell the others I am indisposed! I’m- this one is *meditating.”*

“Wrong position for meditation,” Shen Yuan says and Ming Fan thinks he should have just let the brat deal with Zhao De, actually. “Are you sure you’re fine?” Shen Yuan then asks, and Ming Fan sinks further down until he is laying down in a most undignified sprawl.

Whatever, he has seen the brat worse.

“Go and do your chores, Shidi. Feed your stupid horse.”

“Bao isn’t stupid,” Shen Yuan says, but finally he moves away.

Ming Fan stares up at the ceiling.

“... this one will bring food later,” the brat says. The door closes with a click, and Ming Fan throws an arm over his eyes and tries to breathe.

Mooncake’s mane is braided.

Shen Yuan thinks it looks kind of cute. Ning Yingying has gotten better at braiding, though he doesn’t think the ribbons will stay very long. Hopefully. The bright orange doesn’t look very good on the poor horse, alright, even if Ning Yingying was very excited about ‘matching’ with Mooncake.

Bao is a nice, sensible horse who doesn’t need braiding. Shen Yuan presses his hands to Bao’s side and just feels for a moment. It’s so weird. A great, big creature just *breathing* under his hands as it eats. Warm and steady, Shen Yuan sinking up and down the tiniest bit every time Bao breathes in and out. In and out.

Bao is calm. That means something.

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan says as he presses his cheek against Bao’s fur, a little bristly but still

soft, “do I have white hairs?”

Luo Binghe looks up.

“What?” he asks even as he ties up the feed bag and puts it away where the horses can’t reach, Lotus making that weird horse-sound that Lotus, who likes *talking,* what a weirdo, does more often than not. Binghe gives her a quick pet and then hurries over.

“Did something happen?” Binghe asks and stands close. He doesn’t touch Shen Yuan’s hair, which is nice. He is just looking very closely, keeping his hands behind his back.

Best friend, right there.

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan mumbles, “I dunno. *Something* happened, and now Ming Fan has white hair. But Shizun said it should be fine in the morning? I just- I don’t know, it’s weird. Nothing makes sense.”

Luo Binghe leans back on his heels. Shen Yuan doesn’t mind when the other boy stares at him. He looks so serious; brows furrowed and eyes intense, but not in a way that makes Shen Yuan want to hide.

Shen Yuan stares back. They’re fourteen and Binghe’s skin is still flawless. When will it stop being that? Will he *ever* be an ugly duckling, like Shen Yuan and his too-long limbs and weird nose placement? Because it *is* a weird nose right now, for sure, even if it will *probably* settle in the way it has on Shen Qingqiu’s face.

Or it won’t.

Which would be typical and probably the Scum villain’s doing.

“Is it really white? All of it?” Binghe asks.

Shen Yuan huffs a laugh that doesn’t feel very happy.

“No,” he says and pushes up and away from Bao, who doesn’t even twitch, “just a few strands? I didn’t even see it on the way back, Shizun noticed it.”

Which is *no* excuse. But then again, he and Ming Fan had both barely made it. Shen Yuan had felt like he would fall over at any second or vomit again, but this time on some poor innocent passerby. Ming Fan hadn’t looked much better. It’s just- Shen Yuan should have *seen it.*

“But it makes no sense as to *why* he got white hair,” Shen Yuan continues, “none! We only ran into… alright. So. Binghe, don’t tell A-Ying,” Shen Yuan says, because the girl isn’t there. She was dragged off by Heng He to the baths after having shown up late with a very bedraggled shixiong. What the fuck did they even do? Why was she covered in- like- all of *that?* How was Zu-shixiong not also covered in it? Why did he look miserable while she looked like a lunatic? “Promise!”

“This one won’t tell Shijie,” Luo Binghe dutifully promises.

“Shixiong and I met Zhao De.”

Binghe grows very still.

“But we are both fine,” Shen Yuan adds, even though they aren’t. Even though Ming Fan is laying in bed, looking pale and sickly with white strands in his brown hair, “and we told Shizun.”

Luo Binghe begins to pat him down.

“I’m fine!” Shen Yuan protests, but he still holds his arms out to the side so that Binghe can pat him down like he is airport security, except he’s looking for invisible wounds that Shen Yuan doesn’t fucking have instead of modern day bombs, “Ming-shixiong is the one who has white hair!”

“How does he have white hair!?” Binghe demands, patting done and immediately replaced with a hug. Shen Yuan huffs against his hair, but hugs back when Binghe doesn’t let go. He’s so clingy, his Binghe. Sometimes it’s hard to picture him as the future Demonic Emperor.

“That is what doesn’t make sense,” Shen Yuan says, muffled against thick curls, “Zhao De only… he- I mean, it was just one touch, it doesn’t make sense…”

“So *he* did it?” Luo Binghe says and pulls back just enough to stare at Shen Yuan, hands still holding onto his arms, “has he learned demonic cultivation?”

“He’s not a *demon.”*

“Can’t humans do demonic cultivation as well?” Binghe asks.

“From what I read, it requires more than just one touch,” Shen Yuan replies, which is true. There had not been *many* humans who practiced it in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* but it had always been a very bloody affair. Half the time they had been rogue cultivators turned serial killers. There had been cannibalism. Golden core eating, too, which had been a really fucking cool idea until it fucking *sucked.*

Zhao De had been creepy in his dark robes and how he spoke venomous words with such a horribly casual tone. His mere presence had made Shen Yuan feel nauseous with fear.

But there hadn’t been any blood. Just Zhao De holding Ming Fan’s chin in his hand, smiling as Ming Fan looked the most wretched that Shen Yuan had ever seen him.

To think they had been best friends. Shen Yuan looks at Binghe and can’t even *imagine* his friend doing anything like that. And Binghe is destined to rule the world in a most violent way.

“But then what would make Ming Fan’s hair turn white?” Binghe asks. He is settling down now, his hands loosening their grasp around Shen Yuan’s arms, his dark eyes not quite as wide and fearful. “If it’s not demonic cultivation.”

“I don’t know,” Shen Yuan says.

None of it fits, he doesn’t say, because that much is obvious.

When it is time to retire, Shen Yuan takes a peek at Ming Fan.

The older boy had somewhere between dinner and bedtime settled into a more comfortable position. Sleeping on his side, head against a porcelain pillow and his outer robes folded and put aside. His hair is loose; Shen Yuan hasn’t seen that in a long time, not since they all shared a dormitory.

He knows Ming Fan has only just gained his own room back at the sect. A privilege that should have been given earlier but which Shen Yuan suspects Shen Qingqiu completely forgot about until he shoved Shen Yuan into the side-room. He wonders if the boy likes sleeping alone or if he misses the sound of the dormitories.

Ming Fan doesn’t even twitch when they enter. Zhu Guoliang is not loud but neither is he quiet. His bed is the one closest to Ming Fan’s, and he puts his outer robes next to the head disciple’s pile before he settles in.

When Binghe sits down in front of him, Shen Yuan reluctantly stops looking. It’s fine. Ming Fan still looks tired, but he is sleeping. Surely he will look like his normal bitchy self in the morning.

Binghe needs his hair braided.

Shen Yuan plucks out the hairpin, pressing his thumb against the rough details of the lotus before he gives it to Binghe. He undoes the braids of the day and instead begins to gather the thick mane of curls into sectioned pieces, making sure there are no tangles before he carefully forms it into one long, thick braid.

“I don’t see the white,” his friend mumbles as Shen Yuan works.

“I told you it was hard to see,” he whispers back, “it’s at the back of his head, just a little of it.” Shen Yuan holds the end of the braid with one hand. He holds out his other until Binghe

gives him a ribbon, dark green and practical. With it, he ties it all off, fumbling slightly with the knot.

“Done,” Shen Yuan says and gives Binghe’s back a pat to make the other boy move. They *are* sitting on the blanket, after all. He looks up and sees Zhu Guoliang staring at them with a weird look on his face. Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose. “What?” he asks.

“Nothing,” the older boy says and shifts in his own bed, turning his back to them. But as he does, Shen Yuan realizes that–

Well, okay.

So he and Binghe have shared a bed for like… a year. It’s not *weird* to assume they are going to do it again! For sure! They have a routine and that’s fine, especially during times like these! And sure, they slept in separate bedrolls during the journey, but it was *always* close enough to touch, so he hardly thought of it!

But now there is a fourth bed in this room.

Empty.

Not at all within touching distance.

Shen Yuan looks at his one awful, uncomfortable looking porcelain pillow. He looks at how the bed is narrow, just enough for him and maybe half of Binghe.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says, “I mean. This is fine.”

Luo Binghe frowns.

They both glance at their shixiongs, before they look at each other. They can’t- they can’t just *talk about it,* can they? Revealing that they usually share a bed feels a bit like admitting to sleeping with a nightlight or a teddy bear. Binghe looks as conflicted as Shen Yuan feels.

It shouldn’t be a big deal!

It really shouldn’t be!!!

They are fourteen. They can sleep apart! Really, they only share a bed at home because Shen Qingqiu might kick Binghe out of the house if they don’t. It’s not like they *need* to sleep together to be able to actually *sleep.* That would be dumb. Just because- well, maybe the day had been a little scary and stuff. But still, they are fourteen.

Shen Yuan looks down at his too small bed.

Binghe really can’t fit.

“Goodnight, Binghe,” he says and tries to send a reassuring smile.

Luo Binghe pouts.
Instead of protesting the way Shen Yuan kind of expects him to, Binghe sighs the way a sad dog sighs.

“Goodnight, Yuan,” he replies.

They hug. They part.

They sleep in different beds.

Shen Yuan feels like there is sand in his eyes.

He stares into space as Ming Fan, now recovered enough to stand, lectures them on the plans for the day. Shen Yuan wonders how the guy could possibly already have so much energy. Wasn’t he cursed or something? Where did his energy come from and could he maybe lend some? Just a little?

Shen Yuan glances at Binghe and considers his friend’s shoulder.

It’s at an awkward height. Shen Yuan would have to bend weirdly to use it as a pillow. He stares, eyes dry, and thinks he would be willing to take that risk. He is fourteen. Aren’t children just naturally more flexible? The chances of hurting his neck is at an all-time low. He *could* use Binghe as a pillow while standing up.

“Due to events from yesterday, we will travel in pairs of four. Heng He, Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan and this one will form one group. No, Zhu-shidi, we are *not* swapping. Everyone has two emergency talismans! Only use in emergencies! If anyone uses it for anything but an emergency, this one will ask for Shizun’s guidance!”

A nice way of saying *Shizun will beat the shit out of you.* Shen Yuan blinks and forces himself to look at Ming Fan. The boy’s cheeks are puffed up, hands on his hips. He really doesn’t look that intimidating. Shen Yuan thinks he will probably be taller than Ming Fan in like a year.

Shen Yuan yawns.

Luo Binghe hides his own yawn behind one hand.

Shen Yuan hopes Zhao De doesn’t show up again. He is too tired to have a stupid panic attack, or to protect Ming Fan from his creepy ex-bestie. He doesn’t want to have white hair.

White hair belongs to cool, wise sages and Shen Yuan doesn't think he could *ever* pull that off. Fuck that! No, he will stick to being Binghe's best friend and wingman and–

Binghe takes his hand and tugs. Shen Yuan lets him, because Ming Fan is huffing and puffing and Heng He looks carefully neutral and they are supposed to find a thing that kills, and to do that they need to actually walk. And think and explore and other things that they can't do while standing still, wishing for soft pillows and softer beds.

Shen Yuan tries really hard to not yawn again.

He mostly fails.

They wander the streets. There are no motes for him to try and follow, the temporary boost long gone with sleep. He makes sure to stick close to Binghe and doesn't protest whenever Ming Fan looks back at them to frown and scold them for dragging their feet.

Eventually they make their way to the market. Heng He, who is apparently from a merchant family much like Ming Fan, begins to ask questions in between bargaining with the vendors. Ming Fan stands to the side, dark eyes flicking about, arms crossed and foot tapping.

Shen Yuan remembers the coins which Yue Qingyuan gave him.

"Shixiong," he says, holding onto Binghe's hand as they stop next to Ming Fan, "this one wonders- could we browse as well?"

The older boy frowns. He looks around, eyes quick and scanning, alert in a way that makes it real hard to not follow his example. They are safe, Shen Yuan reminds himself, because Zhao De would be a fucking idiot to do anything in the middle of a crowded market. Shen Qingqiu even left the Singing Dragon, though he looked murderous about it.

"Fine," Ming Fan says once he deems it safe enough, "but do *not* walk out of sight!"

"Yes, shixiong," they both reply.

Shen Yuan hurries to tug Luo Binghe along before Ming Fan remembers that they aren't supposed to even *have* money. There are sweets to be bought, trinkets to look at. He counted the money Yue Qingyuan gave him and he honestly wonders if their sect leader even knows what money *is,* because the amount is ridiculous. *Proud Immortal Demon Way* never did reveal where Yue Qingyuan came from. Maybe he was from a really, really rich family. Maybe it was the opposite, and he just went from having nothing to everything? But also he is the *sect leader.* Surely he should know some of the economical stuff???

Not that he is going to *say* that.

Shen Yuan rather likes having money.

"Yuan, are you sure?" Binghe asks as Yuan buys them a stick of candied hawthorn each, "there is a bookseller right there."

“Binghe has never had this before,” Shen Yuan replies, “of course I’m sure! I’ll buy a book too, but not yet. Don’t worry, Binghe. Shibo gave me more than enough.”

“Not Gege?” Binghe asks, eyes glimmering. Shen Yuan swats at him with his free hand, though he can’t help but smile.

“Not in public!”

“That is odd. Doesn’t Yuan know that Shibo tells *everyone* that you call him Gege?”

“He does *not.”*

“He *does.”*

Shen Yuan is suddenly painfully aware of how warm his face is. He has only ever called Yue Qingyuan *gege* around the man himself and Shen Qingqiu, the latter purely to annoy. He didn’t think the sect leader would want to be known as Shen Qingqiu’s maybe-son’s gege. He *shouldn’t* want to be known as that!

He has it on very good account that no one likes Shen Qingqiu.

“Oh no,” Shen Yuan says, and Luo Binghe laughs, “oh *no,”* Shen Yuan whines, which only makes Binghe laugh harder, “do you think Hua-shishu knows?”

Before Binghe can give him an answer he very much doesn’t want, Shen Yuan decides to save himself.

“Eat your treat!” he blurts out and shoves his own skewer at Binghe.

There is a stall selling ribbons and other trinkets meant for hair. Shen Yuan dives for it, eager for salvation from the awful truth which only Binghe can tell him, though thankfully his friend seems to have taken his words to heart and is happily chewing on hawthorns as he follows.

Considering that Shen Yuan kind of shoved his treat into Binghe’s mouth, the protagonist honestly didn’t have that much choice. But whatever! He still seems to like it.

Shen Yuan decides to ignore his traitorous blush and focuses on the ribbons laid out on display. There are so many of them, in all kinds of colors and materials. Simple ones, solid colors and soft but common materials. The softest kind of silk for others and then there are the ones with *patterns.*

His eyes linger on a green one.

It is a dark green, but so soft and shiny that he knows it will catch the light just perfectly when worn. Shen Yuan picks it up, suddenly very happy that his fingers didn’t get sticky from the sweets.

The ribbon is patterned with pale birds in a way that he is certain shouldn't be possible in the time period they live in. But it looks nice. He glances over his shoulder. Still standing where he was before, Ming Fan quickly looks away, then leans in to speak with Heng He.

"This one," Shen Yuan says, and only barely tries to bargain before he is tucking the ribbon away into one of his pockets.

"Who is it for?" Binghe asks, leaning in to look at it.

"Um," Shen Yuan says, and then there is yelling. They look up and the crowd which had been thick before is suddenly even bigger. Swelling like a wave of people as everyone rushes forwards and to the sides, trying desperately to get out of the way of a carriage that doesn't slow down. It is made with red wood, something he hasn't seen since-

The panicked crowd comes upon them. Shen Yuan can't move, feeling frozen to the spot until he isn't. Until he is being shoved around, and suddenly there is no Binghe or even Ming Fan; there are only people trying to not get trampled, and Shen Yuan stumbles and tries so fucking hard to remember how to *breathe.*

He finds himself pressed against a wall. The crowd streams past, the carriage continues on and Shen Yuan digs his fingers into the rough stone of the house he is leaning against.

"B-Binghe?" he calls out, and doesn't know whether he should laugh or cry when there is no response. It's like the day before all over again, but this time there are no motes to follow.

Shen Yuan swallows back nausea and tries to stand up on his toes instead. He is tempted to bring out Fu Yue, to float on the sword so that he can see above everyone else.

But sword flight is forbidden in the city, they had told him, and so instead he tries to stand as tall as he possibly can.

In the distance, he sees Ming Fan and Heng He helping a vendor putting their stall back up, woven baskets scattered across the street. Binghe isn't with them, and Shen Yuan's nails dig into his palms.

But then his eyes land on the alley where he panicked the previous day. There he sees Luo Binghe, fidgeting and frowning, looking perfectly healthy. It's further away, but now Shen Yuan knows where Ming Fan is. It will be easy to get back, he just needs to get the protagonist, and Ming Fan can yell all he wants *after* they are back. So he begins to make his way over, people cautiously wandering back into the market now when the carriage *(red, why was it red–)* is gone. Shen Yuan is careful to not think about just how many people there are, an easy thing to forget when holding Binghe's hand or listening to Ming Fan's complaints.

"Binghe," he says as he stumbles past a family trying to soothe a crying toddler, "where-" Shen Yuan huffs, annoyed, when he sees Binghe further down the alley, "come back!" he shouts and picks up speed, "you're going the wrong way!"

Luo Binghe stops but doesn't turn around.

"Come on," Shen Yuan says and goes to grab his wrist, Luo Binghe's head turning to give him a smile, "we need to get back before Shixiong realizes we're gone- Binghe?"

His hand closes around empty air.

Shen Yuan freezes. He clutches at nothing and stares at where Binghe had *just been.* The other boy had turned his head and smiled and then he had- not disappeared in the blink of an eye, but twisted, somehow, there and gone and moving like the motes had.

"A-Yuan," a woman says.

Shen Yuan's breath hitches.

"Is that little A-Yuan?" the woman asks, and he hears steps. Soft, soft steps from behind him. Shen Yuan thinks of red carriages. He hears the sound of multiple layers, cloth against cloth. The gentle jingling of jewelry, the woman's voice sounding sweet.

Slowly, he turns around.

Dark blue eyes meet his green.

"Oh, A-Yuan," she says, "how you have *grown."*

Lady Jia smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Lady Jia: ❤️

Backstory time :D

Fanart!!!! I've begun to run out of space so I need to start removing the early chapters ones, so please, go back to previous chapters to find the links for those!
Also if you have made fanart, please tell me in the comments! I only use tumblr. So if you use twitter or anything else, I will likely miss it D:
I'm Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 9:
Hipolish

Chapter 10:
Lady Dysnomia

Anqelbean

Chapter 11:
Frummpets!
Anqelbean
Starry-stan-blog!
Creafanee

Chapter 12:
Starry Stan Blog
Liathcat

Chapter 13:
magnes-io

Chapter 14:
Lady Dysnomia
Frummpets
Anqelbean
A Shy Friend's Art
Quest-draws

Chapter 16:
Ming Fan and Shen Yuan by Frummpets

Several different chapters! But absolute comedy by quest-draws!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Please check the end notes for trigger warnings for this specific chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lady Jia stands in the opening of the alleyway.
The light frames her silhouette, casting her face in shadow. Her hair is pulled up into an artistic bun, golden bells tinkling with every step she takes.

Shen Yuan can't move, feet frozen to the cobbled street and he feels cold with nausea, hands trembling at his sides.

Lady Jia continues to smile as she steps closer and–

–Shen Yuan was eight years old and felt like it; there was the outline of an adult's mind in his memory, fuzzy and vague like a misty morning. He remembered strange things and when he thought, really and truly *thought* about it, he flushed with embarrassment at how childish he was. How small and quick he was to react to things that he shouldn't.

Shen Yuan was eight years old when he was bought.

A woman stopped by the cart.

Shen Yuan was slowly stitching clothes and his fingers were sore from pricking himself with the needle. He tried to not stare as the woman looked around, and he tried to not twitch when the older children around him sat up straighter, doing their best to look more proper.

The woman had black hair and high cheekbones, her lips painted red and her face pale as jade. She looked beautiful, but everyone looked beautiful in this world. What made this lady special was her eyes.

They were dark blue; like deep water.

“Are there any who are capable of sitting still?” she asked the man who owned them, her voice soft and proper, hands tucked into her patterned sleeves. Behind her, two girls stood and waited.

He had wondered if they were slaves, like him. They had nice clothes on and they looked well-fed, their hair thick and bundled into charming braids. Shen Yuan had touched his own hair, distracted.

“Oh,” the woman breathed, and then she had been in front of him. She looked down at where he sat, cross legged by the cart wheel and safe from the sun in its shadow. “Hello, little one.”

(Beginner-level quest issued: Character Growth! Earn B-points for deepening your backstory. Please click to accept.)

Shen Yuan had never had a quest before. He remembered that they were good, and that he should earn as many B-points as possible. He knew it was important, though he often struggled to grasp *why,* that knowledge always dancing around his still too childish mind, not yet used to the concept of a different world from a different life. He hadn’t dared to ask the System more, still unsure how it all worked, if anyone would hear when he asked.

But he looked at the woman who was beautiful, at her maybe-slaves who had clean clothes and were fed well.

Shen Yuan smiled the way he had been taught.

(Quest successfully accepted. We wish you a swift success!)

And that was how he met Lady Jia.

Lady Jia lived in a mansion.

The walls which surrounded it were white with dark green tiles, thick and sturdy and perfectly safe. The courtyard was bustling when they arrived, people busy performing duties that Shen Yuan knew he would soon learn. The houses within were pale and accented with bright red, framing each building like picture frames of a different life.

Shen Yuan had exited the carriage of red wood, still uncertain if he had dreamed it, to be allowed to sit in such a fancy thing, to sit on plush pillows instead of the floor and be given the attention of a woman so far above himself. He clasped his hands in front of him as he

stood and took in the courtyard, his shoes so thin he could feel the cobbled stone underneath. He thought of tv dramas and books and how everything looked so *real* and then the memories drifted away once more.

“Are you excited?” Lady Jia asked, and Shen Yuan nodded and smiled and did his very best to stand still.

Lady Jia smiled back.

“Duán Chen will show you were you will sleep,” the woman said, and one of the girls stepped forward and bowed to Lady Jia, “do make sure the poor thing is given a bath,” Lady Jia continued, “he is filthy.”

It was a simple truth.

Shen Yuan was filthy.

His skin ached from being scrubbed into redness. He did not know how to dry his hair, hands too small and arms too skinny and the towel offered was large and unwieldy. He was dressed in servant-brown and told to follow, and follow he did.

“Is it a new girl?” one of the slaves asked as they entered a room filled with beds, so close most of them touched. She sat with a dress in her lap and a needle in her hand. Stitching, the way Shen Yuan had done not so long ago.

“No,” Duán Chen replied, “a new boy.”

“Oh,” the girl with the needle said, and Shen Yuan smiled at her.

She did not smile back.

The bed was soft and comfortable, though he had to curl up to avoid touching the others. There were more slaves than beds, women and girls sprawled every which way. The room was not quiet. There was the soft sound of breathing, of shifting movements.

Shen Yuan played with a lock of hair.

He had never been so clean before. He could not remember ever sleeping on a bed, only sleeping in the cart or on the ground under it. It was nice and soft and vaguely familiar. Shen Yuan tried to remember, but it was always just a little too difficult. Certain things were easier to remember than others.

This was a book.

His name was the same.

He was eight-and-twenty and not sick like before.

Shen Yuan wondered if he was the only boy.

Shen Yuan fell asleep.

Lady Jia touched his hair.

It looked so much darker when she curled it around one finger. Blue and black and smooth like silk. Shen Yuan held still, and he smiled when Lady Jia smiled.

“Better,” she said, and dragged her fingers through his hair, “too short, still, but it shall grow.” It reached his shoulders. Shen Yuan held his hands clasped behind his back and leaned into the touch like a cat asking to be petted.

Lady Jia’s laughter was soft.

“So sweet,” she cooed, “far prettier than all the other boys.”

“Thank you, Lady Jia,” he replied and blushed.

Her eyes were so very blue.

Shen Yuan was to follow Lady Jia.

He trailed after Duán Chen and Wu Chuntao as they in turn trailed after Lady Jia. Their clothes were softer and more colorful, but his brown had the same cut as theirs.

Lady Jia spent a lot of time alone.

He knew she had a husband. She mentioned him at times, but Shen Yuan never saw the man more than brief glimpses of carriages arriving and leaving. There was a concubine or two, he knew, but they did not live in the same house as Lady Jia. She did not like to speak of them.

The System offered points like falling crumbs.

It was a fun game.

He performed small tasks and each smile from Lady Jia was another point. So he continued to do everything someone of his status was allowed. Lady Jia watched, amused, her eyes dark and calm like ocean waters before a storm.

“Sit,” Lady Jia would say, and he sat in front of her, and she would comb his hair and idly play with it. She would tell him how pretty he was.

Pretty enough to be a girl.

“Are there any boys?” Shen Yuan dared to ask Duán Chen once.

“Not right now,” she said, “not here, at least.”

“Oh. Where are they?”

“Some work in the stables,” Duán Chen said, “others were sold off.” And her brown eyes fell on him like pebbles. He wrinkled his nose at the expression she made, something blank and sad all at once, and Duán Chen offered a smile that did not feel like a smile at all.

“Perhaps you will be sold too,” she said, as if reassuring.

“But I like it here,” Shen Yuan said.

Duán Chen watched him. Her hair was brown like copper; turning gold-red in the sunlight, wavy and carefully braided out of her face. She was a pretty girl, he thought, with pale skin

and brown eyes that reminded him of chestnuts. She looked like she should be warm; like she should be laughing.

Shen Yuan doesn't think he has ever seen her smile.

"Lady Jia is kind," he added.

"A-Yuan," Duán Chen said, "you will grow into an adult. A Lady should not keep male servants of a certain age. You will not always remain here."

"But I like it here," he repeated, a tremble in his voice.

"You should sleep," Duán Chen said and nothing else.

Duán Chen said nothing when Lady Jia slapped her.

Thin lines of red appeared on her cheek; blood beading and spilling, and Shen Yuan froze where he was kneeling, where he had been serving Lady Jia's dinner. Everyone in the room grew quiet.

"This one saw you speak to *my* husband," Lady Jia said, her voice calm as she dropped her hand, her long nails pointed. Shen Yuan had found them elegant and nostalgic, fuzzy recollections of a mother who liked manicures. Now he stared at them with wide eyes, heart beating like a hummingbird's wings against his ribcage, "do you plan to become his third?" Lady Jia asked.

Duán Chen kowtowed.

"This lowly one does not, my Lady," she said, "this one apologizes, my Lady."

"You are not pretty enough for him," Lady Jia said, "do not dare to gaze at him, for he will not gaze back."

"Yes, my Lady."

Lady Jia's eyes were like whirlpools. She turned away from Duán Chen and moved towards the table. Shen Yuan stared, nine years old, and Lady Jia smiled as she sat down. She reached out and gently brushed hair from his face.

She did not look like someone who would make people bleed.

“A-Yuan,” she said, “your hair is growing so much. Perhaps you can braid mine later, to learn for yourself. Would that not be fun?”

Shen Yuan stared.

Lady Jia stared back, eyes dark. She raised a single brow when he did not respond. The hand that touched his hair moved to cup his cheek instead. The tips of her nails pressed against skin.

“A-Yuan,” she said, voice soft and low, “is something the matter?”

Shen Yuan forced a smile.

“N-No, my Lady,” he said, and Lady Jia smiled and let him go.

She was having a bad day, he thought as he sat by her side and watched her eat. *Everyone has bad days,* he thought, and trembled as Duán Chen poured the tea, her cheek still bleeding.

(Host has unlocked Lady Jia’s Character! +200 B-points!

Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!

Good things need to be said three times!)

The System was his first friend.

It was his only friend; a secret thing he could not tell anyone about, but he trusted it. It helped him. It gave hints and ideas, and made Shen Yuan feel bigger than he was. Sometimes, when he had enough points, he liked to use them to remember more.

The System said he had all of his memories; his mind was just a little too small to process it. Giving points to the System helped. Shen Yuan knew how to read but not how to write, and he knew he was in a world he loved with characters he hated except for one, someone that he hoped to one day meet. Luo like the river and Binghe like winter.

The System helped him know more- he learned strange words and memes and context, he remembered his meimei and his two older brothers and he remembered parents who tried to remain strong as he laid sick, sick, sick and dead in bed after eating one bad thing.

Lady Jia's smiles didn't seem as warm as before.

She liked it when her servants were smart but not too smart, he knew. They could not be prettier than her, though he was unsure how anyone *could* be prettier, for she was beautiful in a way he had never seen before. She liked it when people knew what she wanted without her saying it.

At nine, it was difficult to sometimes read what she wanted. Hánzi was easier to read than facial expressions. If he was older, maybe he would know more. If his mind was a little bigger–

Shen Yuan gave the System more points.

Lord Jia had dark eyes and dark hair and a face that looked carved from stone, sharp and angular and cold. He looked like he had sucked on a lemon just before he met you, lips curled downwards and face pinched but not enough that you could *tell* him that you knew he had sucked on a lemon.

Or perhaps he only looked like that around Lady Jia.

He sat at the table and ate. Lady Jia sat opposite of him. They were silent, and Shen Yuan imagined the Luo river covered in thin ice waiting to crack. He stood behind Lady Jia and did not stare, because staring was rude and Lady Jia did not like *rude.* She liked *sweet.*

Lord Jia glanced upwards.

"When did you buy a new girl?" he asked, and Shen Yuan almost opened his mouth to ask what new girl. But Lord Jia looked at *him,* and Shen Yuan knew his clothes were cut like Duán Chen's and he had never worn gendered clothes before, only what was available and Lady Jia had nothing but female servants and...

Shen Yuan's breath hitched.

"It has been a year now," Lady Jia said, "isn't she sweet? Like a doll."

Lord Jia looked towards Duán Chen and Wu Chuntao, standing next to Shen Yuan, and his

pinched face became stern. Like stone crumbling in a storm to reveal sharper edges, and Shen Yuan stood completely still because Lady Jia did not like fidgeting.

“You seem eager to break your old ones,” Lord Jia said, and Shen Yuan did not look at Duán Chen’s face, mottled with bruises of backhanded slaps and healing scratches.

“She is seventeen now,” Lady Jia said, voice soft and casual, and she picked up her cup of tea and drank before she continued, “it is time for her to be sold to someone else soon. Unless this one’s husband wishes to keep her?”

Lord Jia sneered.

“I do not lay with slaves.”

“Did this wife imply such a thing?”

They stared at each other.

When Lord Jia left, tea was thrown at Duán Chen.

Shen Yuan thought of demons and peak lords, of little children who cried as they kneeled. Duán Chen did not cry. She bowed her head and cleaned it up as Lady Jia sat down to read.

“Come, A-Yuan,” and Shen Yuan would kneel next to her. Lady Jia’s fingers combed through his hair, plain and unadorned. “You should braid your hair, little one,” she said, and Shen Yuan knew many more braids than Lady Jia had taught him.

He remembered videos online and a meimei who begged and nagged. Shen Yuan knew that if he tried, he could repeat them and make Lady Jia stand out; brand new braids that would make other nobles fawn and gush and adore.

He didn’t want to.

Shen Yuan smiled a trembling smile, because he was never quite sure how to fake it, how to make it mean something. Lady Jia did not seem to mind. She watched him smile as her nails scraped lightly against his scalp. It did not hurt.

“Lady Jia,” he said, clutching at his clothes, knuckles white and fabric wrinkling, “may this one ask- why did Lord Jia think…”

“A-Yuan wants to stay, doesn’t he?” Lady Jia cut in and he nodded, “my husband does not

allow servant boys. It is fine, of course. You are so very pretty, A-Yuan. He doesn't need to know."

Shen Yuan was nine years old.

But I'll grow, he didn't say. He sat quietly as she played with his hair and spoke of ribbons, of perhaps buying him new clothes. Brown was so *boring,* Lady Jia said.

Shen Yuan watched Duán Chen and thought of how pretty she was. Pretty enough for a book, for a badly written plotline.

How old was Luo Binghe?

Would he come and save Duán Chen?

Would he save–

Shen Yuan didn't want to be pretty.

But being pretty was better, was it not? When he grew up and he became less pretty, what would happen? What would happen when Lord Jia saw that the little girl was looking like a boy in a girl's clothes? What would people say?

Should he cut his hair?

It didn't matter, did it? Everyone had long hair. Only criminals and the poorest of the poor did not. Lord Jia himself had longer hair than Shen Yuan. It would not help, and the memories of a life where short hair was masculine were– far. Distant, and he didn't think much of short hair anymore. Short hair was *bad.* He should not cut his hair.

Lady Jia would be so *mad.*

Shen Yuan was clumsy.

He tripped and the tray with cups fell. Porcelain shards scattered across the floor, pieces of white and blue against dark wood. The world grew quiet and he dared not reach for what he had dropped.

Lady Jia watched him for a long moment.

Her eyes were dark blue and outside the sky was gray-purple with a brewing storm. She watched and Shen Yuan didn't move. No one said a word. Duán Chen and Wu Chuntao stood like statues.

"A-Yuan," Lady Jia said, and he shuffled over and kneeled before her, brow pressed to the floor in a kowtow.

"This one is sorry, Lady Jia," he apologized and squeezed his eyes shut.

When she petted his hair, it was a relief. Her touch was gentle and familiar, an easy forgiveness–

His scalp stung like a thousand needles as the petting turned to grabbing, *holding,* as she yanked his head up by his hair alone.

Shen Yuan gasped; his eyes teared up and he reached up–

"Don't," Lady Jia said, and Shen Yuan froze.

Slowly, his hands dropped back down. He trembled. Lady Jia did not smile as she continued to hold him by his hair. Her eyes were blank, her face cold. Shen Yuan's breath hitched and he *tried* to not cry.

Trying was not as good as doing.

"Is A-Yuan crying because he was bad?" Lady Jia cooed when the tears fell, "do you know, A-Yuan, even when crying you are very pretty?" She yanked him closer and he fell forwards and cried out when the fall was stopped by her hand still in his hair. It hurt. *It hurt.*

"S-Sorry," he gasped.

Lady Jia let go.

"Wu Chuntao, clean up after him," she said as Shen Yuan's palms stung against the floor, the *thud* of the harsh landing making his wrists feel numb, "Duán Chen, fetch the comb. A-Yuan," she then said, "won't you braid my hair?"

Shen Yuan nodded and dared not look up.
He flinched when she petted him again, her hand gentle once more.

Lady Jia never cared if he flinched.

She petted him until there was a comb in his hands. Only then did she stop and only then did he move to sit behind her.

He bit his lip and tried his best to keep his hands steady.

The boys who worked in the stables were all older than him.

He was ten years old and his scalp stung more than it did not, the brand on his neck itching every time Lady Jia let her touch linger a moment too long. The stables looked more tempting each day, but the boys were all bigger and stronger than him. They had scars.

Lady Jia watched them from her window sometimes, long nails tapping against wood.

“System, how old is Luo Binghe?” he whispered in the night, knowing now that no one could hear him speak to it. But nighttime was for whispers, and so whisper he did.

(The Protagonist is ten years old!)

“Like me,” Shen Yuan said.

There would be no Luo Binghe that could save Duán Chen and him, then. He should be upset. He was, just a little bit. But he thought of isekai and transmigration, of hopeful stories about friendship. Of changing the plot, and he felt just a little bit warmer.

“Two years,” he whispered and tugged at his hair, felt his scalp protest and did not care. What did it matter? If anyone should touch his hair, it should be *him.* He was so fucking tired of others doing it. “System, will you tell me when I can leave this place?”

Shen Yuan swallowed.

“What do I need to *do* to leave?” he asked, and the System revealed a list of things he could buy. Things he needed to own to escape. Items and clues and distractions, directions towards a mountain with twelve peaks. Shen Yuan looked at his B-points and he knew he didn’t have enough. Not yet.

He curled up tighter and watched Duán Chen twitch in her sleep, her feet brushing against his. They were all so cramped, none of them growing smaller as the years passed, no new beds placed in the small room.

Shen Yuan still wore the wrong clothes.

Duán Chen's face was always bruised.

Shen Yuan had left the room for only a moment.

He had been told to fetch Lady Jia's favorite comb and the red ribbons she had grown to favor lately, the little golden bells that Lord Jia had gifted her a mere week ago and which Lady Jia seemed to wear out of spite alone. He had left, because he was ten years old and was now trusted to find his way. He had left Lady Jia to drink her tea, Duán Chen and Wu Chuntao staying behind to attend to their Lady.

He had left for just a moment.

Duán Chen was on the floor.

She was on the floor, but not in a bow. She hunched over like something scared, the blankness of her face gone and replaced by the kind of fear he had never before seen Duán Chen show. She was held in place by servants that he could not remember the names of. Wu Chuntao stood to the side, her face pale and hands clutching at her clothes.

Lady Jia loomed. Her long hair was loose, dark and thick. In her hand she clutched a shard of ceramic and her blue eyes were narrowed into slivers as she stared down at Duán Chen.

The cup she had drunk tea from was scattered across the floor. The matching set had followed it, he saw, feeling oddly distant. Pieces spread like blood splatter, like a crime scene of black and white porcelain. They matched the vase next to him. It had flowers on it.

"I'm sick of your face," Lady Jia said, and she leaned down enough to grab Duán Chen's chin, "my dear husband visits so often these days. I know *why,"* she said, not a hiss nor a snarl in her voice.

Calm and even, soft spoken like a proper lady.

A girl's face was important. Their skin needed to be smooth and unblemished if they wished for a husband. Duán Chen's bruises were nearly gone for once, no scratches remained and it

was important for her to have a nice face.

Lady Jia brought up the shard and she held it like one would hold a knife.

CRASH!

Lady Jia's blue eyes snapped to him.

Shen Yuan stood frozen in the doorway. The teeth of a wooden comb dug into his left hand, the soft jingling of bells sounding across the room as he trembled. His right hand stayed in the air, fingertips numb.

The black and white vase laid in pieces before him.

Lady Jia straightened. The shard in her hand fell to the floor, shattering into further pieces, and she watched him with eyes like whirlpools. There was nothing but silence and his heartbeat, and he wondered if anyone else could hear it.

"Throw her out," Lady Jia said, and the servants who had been holding down Duán Chen hoisted her up. Shen Yuan dared not look away as she was dragged past him, and she did not struggle.

The silence returned.

Lady Jia walked towards him.

"A-Yuan," she said, and he could not breathe, he could not *move,* could not even attempt to duck his head before she grabbed his hair in a harsh yank. The bells and comb fell to the floor, the red ribbons fluttering down onto them. He bit his lip hard enough to bleed.

She stared down at him.

He expected words.

Instead she walked past him and dragged him with her, and he struggled to follow, steps clumsy as it hurt and hurt and *hurt,* and Lady Jia dragged him out of the room and down the hall, Wu Chuntao pale as a ghost as she followed behind.

"Good dolls stay still," Lady Jia said as she walked across dark wooden floors and past servants who looked away as Shen Yuan cried–

– and she cups his face with both hands in an alleyway, pupils so wide he can barely see the blue of her eyes and she says with a smile too wide, "and you have always been such a good doll, *A-Yuan."*

He stares back, breath hitching, hands trembling, and he is alone, the scent of her perfume

cloying and he can't breathe as he feels his knees grow weak, as her lips part to reveal teeth too sharp to be human and–

"YUAN!" Binghe screams, running down the alleyway and Shen Yuan's hands feel warm and itchy and he lets them *burn* as he shoves them forwards.

There is a bright light followed by an inhuman shriek.

Shen Yuan tries to step back, vision hazy, but claws dig into his arms and refuses to let go, and he has no energy left, his hands feeling oddly cold from the blast he made. He crumples and is held up by nothing but Lady Jia who isn't her but something even worse.

There are chunks missing from her, he realizes, and feels sick with it. Where his hands shoved at, pieces are *missing,* but there is no blood, only dark purple smoke drifting into the air and Lady Jia's face twisting into a snarl as she grows far too tall and then Binghe is there, ramming straight into her and sending all of them to the ground.

There are awful sounds and he can't fucking *see,* all of them scrambling to figure out what the fuck is happening until Binghe drags him away from her and Shen Yuan tries to help even as his limbs feel too heavy to move. All he manages are feeble kicks until the creature- except he *knows* what it is now, an emotional parasite, related to dream demons and nothing like them in any kind of way that matters- and then the demon grabs his leg and claws him to the bone.

Shen Yuan screams.

Zheng Yang's golden glare appears, a burst of light that the demon avoids. It shoots into the air and hits nothing, and instead Binghe throws himself forward to stab the demon itself.

The sword goes straight though purple smoke, before it's grabbed by the clawed hands of what now only barely looks like Lady Jia.

"Oh, I will eat you too," she hisses, "but one meal at a time, little cultivator!" before she throws Binghe away. Shen Yuan watches the protagonist slam into a wall, not knocked out but gasping for air from the impact.

And then the parasitic demon reaches for him again.

"Fuck," Shen Yuan chokes, and he manages a small blast. But whatever damage he and Binghe had done is already disappearing. It doesn't even flinch when the energy blast slams against its shoulder.

They need talismans Shen Yuan doesn't have, things Binghe knew how to make when he was twenty and out of the Abyss, talismans to cut it off from its victim, because right now all they are doing is delaying the inevitable and Shen Yuan sobs as he tries to kick it away.

"Sssh, A-Yuan," it croons in Lady Jia's voice as it pulls him closer by the leg, blood welling up from where it clawed, and *fuck,* is he going to bleed out? Is this fucking it? He can't– "I

like my meals slower, but this time I must feast. Stay still, doll."

Perhaps it wanted to say more as it leaned in, Lady Jia's beautiful, awful face twisted by its too wide smile, sapping his energy with each word falling from its lips.

Instead there is a sword glare white like snow.

The demon lets him go with a snarl and whirls around, its arm cut off by the shoulder; past it, Shen Yuan sees the tall silhouette of Qing Jing's Peak Lord.

He has never been so happy to see Shen Qingqiu.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warnings for this specific chapter:
Child slavery, child abuse, emotional abuse, non-sexual objectification, forced feminization, maiming.

How about that fun lil backstory hm????
I've loved all the theories you guys left in chapter 17!!! Truly feeding me, I hope you're not disappointed with the reveal. ^^
The chapter is a bit shorter than normal, but I'm *peace sign* siiiick. And also it was this or try and write twice the normal length and, again, I'm sick!
So no thank you :D my spelling is atrocious when I got a fever going.
but hey I bet this chapter was meaty enough anyway ;)

MF, in the market, hysterical: WHERE ARE MY SHIDIS
HH: um well I just saw Shizun run over there-
MF: FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!

Hello! There is fanart :D
Before I used to linked all the fanart this fic ever received here, but I've decided to only link the new ones for each chapter now. This way you guys will have an easier time see when there is new stuff! Please go back a few chapters for ALL of them, it's worth it <3

The boy's first meeting by space-atrium

Stressed Out Ming Fan by Frummpets

Ring Girl Binghe by Someonewhoreadswaaytoomuchfanfic

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu stands in the opening of the alley.

Xiu Ya is pointed towards the demon, still glowing with the sword glare which the man had released. He is not holding the sword- instead it hovers before him, Shen Qingqiu's hand forming a sign against his chest.

Shen Yuan watches as the demon arm that had dug into his leg melts into smoke, there and gone, before it once more grows back on the demon as it seems torn between where to go next.

Luo Binghe coughs and struggles to sit up, and Shen Yuan's pained gasps are loud in the alley.

He hopes that the demon will go for Shen Qingqiu. The man has his fucking sword out, after all, and Shen Yuan is- bleeding. A lot. So fucking much, actually, and he tries to sit up to put pressure on it, but his leg is slippery, the fabric already soaked through, and whatever adrenaline he had before is quickly fading. He feels horribly, awfully sluggish.

If the demon just focuses on Shen Qingqiu, it will be *fine.* It doesn't- it doesn't *need* to kill its victims for energy, though he knows that it will give it a boost to fully drain someone, especially if it *kills* kills. If it does what it had been about to do to him, blood and flesh and energy.

But a power boost snatched from a disciple won't be enough to let it defeat a goddamn peak lord! It should know that! Even with a low IQ!

The demon turns its back to Shen Qingqiu, its eyes on Shen Yuan.

Fuck.

Now more shadow than shape, it throws itself at Shen Yuan. He tries to roll out of the way and is halted by the pain in his leg, sharp and awful, a scream choked out of him and he *knows* he is going to fucking die, it will slit his throat and eat up his life force like the worst slurpie ever and–

Green robes take up his sight; patterned with swirling silver clouds, and Shen Yuan stares wide eyed as Shen Qingqiu sends out another sword glare, his back now to Shen Yuan.

The demon snarls as it is cut in half, smoke already reforming.

"Stay put," Shen Qingqiu snaps, and for a moment he doesn't know if the man is telling him

or the demon. Except then there is a talisman slapped onto his face, and he flinches from the force of it, from the odd *tug* he feels as a connection he had been unaware of is brutally cut off.

The demon *shrieks.*

Shen Qingqiu moves his hand in a sharp motion. Xiu Ya shoots forward once more. There are bursts of light and the sound of a sword clashing against claws. Shen Yuan can't see much from where he lays on the ground, only the flashes of light and the awful sounds of scraping claws.

"Yuan," Binghe says, suddenly right there. He looks pale and stiff, and Shen Yuan hopes the protagonist isn't too hurt. The fucking wall slam didn't look *comfy,* after all, and it's not like Binghe got super healing yet. Or does he? Can he share? Can he share the super healing???

He thinks the blood loss is getting to him.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan says and tries to sit up properly, but before he can remember how bad of a mistake *that* would be, Luo Binghe pushes him back down in a panic, his dark eyes looking too big for his face.

"Don't move!" his friend cries.

"Alright," Shen Yuan says, dizzy and cold and shivering. Apparently agreeing without a fight is worse, because Luo Binghe goes from scared to *terrified.* "I mean," Shen Yuan forces out, breath hitching as he grabs hold of Binghe's hand, "I- I want to see what Shizun is doing-"

The bright white glare of Xiu Ya flashes over them, and Shen Yuan gasps as Luo Binghe covers him with his body, the purple smoke of the demon there and gone, quickly replaced once more with green robes.

Over Binghe's shoulder he can see how Shen Qingqiu's sword meets claws, how he neatly avoids every attempt the demon makes to reach him. But he also sees how narrow the alley is and how Shen Qingqiu time and time again comes too close to touching the parasitic demon in order to keep it away from Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe, from fleeing out of the alley and into the crowd outside.

It's too fast even when not connected to anyone; it needs to run out of energy, but with several dead elders, Ming Fan's energy and now Shen Yuan's that might take *ages* and he's still bleeding and there are still the flashes of Lady Jia, there and gone amongst the purple smoke, a twisted version of her face and Binghe keeps hovering over him, looking scared but determined and holding onto his sword–

Blood drips from Shen Qingqiu's cheek.

Shen Yuan stares as the demon grins and *twists;* the purple smoke turns dark as it grows solid. He watches as it unfurls like curtains at a theater, black robes spreading out as it grows taller, stronger, claws becoming human hands, Lady Jia's face reshaping like clay into a

strong jaw, blue eyes becoming dark brown.

“Xiao-Jiu,” the demon says and it’s like a puzzle piece clicking into place.

He stares as Yue Qingyuan smiles.

It is a smile he recognizes.

Shen Qingqiu stands between them. Shen Yuan stares and clutches at Binghe and he wonders if he feels cold from the bleeding or the appearance before them.

Ming Fan saw Zhao De and he saw *her*.

Why does Shen Qingqiu see–?

“Xiao-Jiu,” Yue Qingyuan says again, and Shen Yuan knows it’s the demon. He knows that it is the demon who takes a step closer, who smiles just like Yue Qingyuan does when he wants Shen Qingqiu’s attention, when he wants to soften Shen Qingqiu’s temper.

He knows.

“I am sorry,” Yue Qingyuan says and Shen Qingqiu grabs the hilt of Xiu Ya mid-air, his face blank in a way that Shen Yuan hasn’t ever seen, “this one truly did try, Xiao-Jiu. But there is only so much one can do, isn’t there?”

“Do not wear his face,” Shen Qingqiu says, but the demon only lets the smile turn sad as it places Yue Qingyuan’s hand onto Shen Qingqiu’s arm. The green fabric wrinkles as it squeezes, soft and comforting.

“The sect comes first,” Yue Qingyuan says, “you know this. I’ve *tried* to help you, but there is only so much I can do. This one didn’t even think you would become a Peak Lord,” Yue Qingyuan admits with that sad smile, still holding onto Shen Qingqiu’s arm, “this one had hoped that Xiao-Jiu would find somewhere more… out of the way.”

Why wasn’t Shen Qingqiu stepping away?

Why was it *Yue Qingyuan?* Shen Yuan remembers the death of the sect leader in the novel, of course, but that’s- this is *different.* Shen Qingqiu was behind Yue Qingyuan’s death but that wasn’t because of things *now,* surely? Surely it was something that Shen Yuan can *change?*

The demon doesn’t care, of course. It keeps talking.

“You always end up underfoot,” Yue Qingyuan says, “never where you belong. Not *really.* I knew when I arrived at the mountain. I knew that you could never find a place there. I thought that perhaps it would be best to leave you where you were instead- more comfortable for everyone. And I was right, wasn’t I?”

Yue Qingyuan sighs.

“You are so clever, Xiao-Jiu. Why didn’t you stay away?”

Shen Qingqiu grabs hold of Yue Qingyuan’s robes with his free hand. It makes the demon’s eyes widen in brief surprise, though it smiles once more when Shen Qingqiu pulls it closer with a snarl.

“This one will take *great* pleasure in killing you,” he says like a wolf biting into flesh, the icy calm gone for something bloodier.

“And yet you have not struck this one down,” Yue Qingyuan says with a soothing voice, “perhaps because you *know* this needs to be said. Perhaps because you can’t deny the truth that your Qi-ge is *tired* of feeling nothing but pity-”

Shen Qingqiu tightens his grip on Xiu Ya and in the blink of an eye there is Yue Qingyuan’s head, flying through the air.

It lands and rolls to a stop next to Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe, and he stares as the shocked, blank gaze of a dead man meets his own before it breaks and disappears into purple smoke.

Silence settles over the alley.

“Demons,” Shen Qingqiu sneers and sheathes Xiu Ya once more.

Shen Yuan stares at the spot where Yue Qingyuan’s head just were.

He stares until Shen Qingqiu kneels by him, forcing Luo Binghe to let go and shuffle to the other side. Binghe immediately goes back to holding his other hand, he vaguely realizes as he focuses on Shen Qingqiu’s face.

The man doesn’t look disturbed or even angry; the blank mask is back as he examines Shen Yuan’s wound, as he begins to take care of it with a quick and steady touch, qiankun pouch pulled out and medical supplies revealed and he doesn’t look like he just killed Yue Qingyuan.

Shen Yuan feels sick.

But that might be the blood loss.

“How did Shizun…?” he asks, words slurring as he clutches at Binghe’s hand, and oh. His hands are sticky with his own blood. He is making Binghe dirty.

Shen Yuan tries to tug his hand free; Binghe refuses, and he feels ashamed at the relief it brings him. He squeezes and gets a squeeze back.

“Talismans,” Shen Qingqiu says, and now when Shen Yuan looks at him properly, he sees one on Shen Qingqiu’s chest. He must have put one on the demon too- something to cut and connect all at once, to let him kill it so quickly, taking advantage of the shock.

That's smart.

"Ming Fan," Shen Qingqiu then snaps, and oh, when did Ming Fan get there? Heng He is also there, standing awkwardly in the back. Shen Yuan blinks slowly at them as Ming Fan falls to his knees next to Shen Qingqiu, hard enough he can hear the impact of it. Ouch. "Wrap his leg, this one needs to transfer qi."

"Yes, Shizun!"

Shen Yuan groans and lets his head fall back.

He thinks he keeps blacking out. Moments pass, pain flares and fades and flares again. Luo Binghe keeps holding his hand and there is the steady flow of cold-like-water-qi, familiar and comforting if not comfortable and Shen Yuan has the sneaking suspicion that he is going to be yelled at very soon.

"That is enough," Shen Qingqiu says and Shen Yuan blinks back into focus. There are green robes briefly covering his vision as the man stands up, towering like a particularly green ice statue. Ming Fan, hands covered in blood and face pale, stands up as well. He can see the glint of white in Ming Fan's hair, like the silver threads in Shen Qingqiu's robes.

There is a sharp *CRACK* of skin upon skin and Shen Yuan startles. Ming Fan's head has snapped to the side, his cheek a vicious red. Shen Qingqiu's hand is still raised and Shen Yuan stares.

"Did this one not order you to ensure none would travel alone?" Shen Qingqiu demands and Ming Fan flinches as Shen Yuan feels his own hands twitch and itch and burn, "not only are you *useless* in completing a simple mission, but your shidi nearly died because you did not follow this master's orders. This one should have you whipped."

Ming Fan looks nothing like Duán Chen.

But Shen Qingqiu's dark hair drapes like a curtain and his crown glints as his voice remains viciously even and calm, just like–

"Yuan!" Binghe gasps as Shen Yuan rips his hand free, and there is that fire inside, bursting forth from his palms. And it keeps *going,* and Shen Yuan chokes as the pain spreads through his body and oh fuck, he might just fucking die after all.

He doesn't know what happens next.

All he knows is that he at some point finally passes out.

Shen Yuan feels like the world is moving beneath him.

He screws up his face and groans, the rocking motion constant and just on the edge of nausea inducing. He tries to raise his arms, but they hurt as much as they feel like overcooked noodles. So Shen Yuan lets them rest where they are, fingers twitching against what feels like fabric.

Instead he reluctantly opens his eyes.

Above him, there is a wooden ceiling. Shen Yuan stares up at it for a long moment, bleary eyed and tired as he tries to trace the grain patterns in the wood with his eyes alone. Sunlight passes over it, dappled sunspots that leave as quickly as they arrive. So they are moving. But he is lying down? That makes no sense. His brain is a boiled egg, he thinks.

"You're awake," Shen Qingqiu says.

Shen Yuan blinks. Slowly he turns his head, and he grimaces at the motion. Even *that* fucking hurts- it's like every sinew in his body has been stretched too far, like his muscles has been flipped onto the wrong side and his bones used as drum sticks.

Even his *skin* feels too tight.

But there Shen Qingqiu is; sitting on the other side of the carriage, because that is where they are, he realizes. In the carriage. The one that Shen Qingqiu had used like his own fancy batcave the entire trip to the city.

Shen Qingqiu doesn't look different.

There is that dark, silky hair. The crown of silver and green jade holding it away from a pale face. Green eyes staring him down like he has done something wrong. Shen Qingqiu looks the same as always except for the scratch on his cheek, and for a blessed moment, Shen Yuan doesn't know why he expected it to be different.

Until he remembers Lady Jia. Until he remembers Ming Fan's red cheek. Until he remembers Yue Qingyuan's head sailing through the air, the wide eyes and slack mouth of a dead man.

The blank face of Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Yuan feels nauseous.

"Do *not* throw up," Shen Qingqiu snaps, "you are not to move at all, in fact. Not only did you let your arms be scratched, your leg be mauled and your very life force fed upon. You *also* went into qi deviation."

He says it with disgust and a heavy dose of disappointment.

“I didn’t mean to,” Shen Yuan says and feels his cheeks heat at how weak he sounds. Flimsy as a piece of paper or worse.

“Intent does not matter,” Shen Qingqiu says, which should have been expected. It’s the guy’s favorite thing to say, after all. Intent does not matter, but- “results do,” Shen Qingqiu finishes. And then he adds in a frosty tone, “are you mocking me?”

Shen Yuan, who had been mouthing along, winces.

“No, Shizun.”

“It would certainly be a *mistake* to do so, would it not?”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“If not for your leg, this master would have you exit this carriage immediately for such disrespect. Stay still.”

What the fuck else is he going to do? Shen Yuan doesn’t think he could disobey even if he wanted to. He hasn’t felt this awful since the first time he ended up at Qian Cao Peak. There is absolutely no way he can prevent Shen Qingqiu from grabbing his wrist and pushing a rush of cold qi into his veins.

“Where are we?” he dares to ask.

“On our way back to the sect.”

Well, that was probably a dumb question to ask. They *are* in the carriage, and Shen Yuan, boiled egg brain or not, doesn’t think Shen Qingqiu would have him resting in the carriage for the five minute walk back to the Inn. But Shen Yuan wasn’t the only one injured.

“Where’s…?”

“Your *friend* is riding with the others, and leading the horse you foolishly named with him. He, just like you, will *also* have to seek medical attention once we return. Because you both showed the same amount of *thinking* as the brutes of Bai Zhan does and the little beast likely has cracked ribs from the scuffle.”

Shen Qingqiu says all of this as he leans in close, hands gentle where his qi isn’t. Shen Yuan stares up at him, and thinks about snapping something back. But he is *really* tired, he decides and doesn’t think about the demon and the shape it took. The way Shen Qingqiu’s hair falls over his shoulder.

However this close, it’s hard to miss the white strands by Shen Qingqiu’s temple. They are just barely visible against the black, so few they might as well not exist. Fewer than what Ming Fan had growing from the back of his head, similar to a skunk stripe if Shen Yuan wanted to be mean about it.

“Do I have white hair?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

“The demon barely spent time with you,” Shen Qingqiu says and puts Shen Yuan’s wrist back down against the seat he is laying on, “your precious hair is intact.”

It felt like the demon spent more than enough time with him. But it only barely touched him, didn’t it? Before Binghe saved him. Not like Ming Fan who spent who knows how long with it. Not like Shen Qingqiu, who spent what felt like an eternity fighting it and probably got backlash from the talismans. And yet.

“Not even *one* strand?” Shen Yuan asks.

“One that you can pluck.”

Having all white hair would have been cool. If not for everything that would come with it. Shen Yuan grimaces at the idea of people staring, more than they ever stared back when he had short hair. Perhaps it is a good thing he has barely any white. He rather let Binghe have the spotlight, and for a moment he tries to imagine Luo Binghe with white hair.

“Instead of asking stupid questions, disciple Shen should continue to rest. An easy task to accomplish if one were to stop talking.”

The words have bite to them; deep enough that Shen Yuan tears his thoughts away from a Binghe with snow white hair- it would be way too cool, anyway, even for a protagonist as cool as Luo Binghe- and focuses back on Shen Qingqiu.

“... are you angry?” he wonders.

Shen Qingqiu looks at him.

“You disobeyed orders and did not use either of the *two* emergency talismans given to you upon encountering the demon, nor did you remember that you have a *sword,”* the man says, and Shen Yuan imagines venom dripping from a snake’s fangs because Shen Qingqiu speaks like he is about to bite, like Shen Yuan is a mouse that he is considering whether he should maim or swallow whole. “This one is not something so trivial as *angry,* disciple Shen.”

He doesn’t say more than that, and Shen Yuan knows better than to ask. The tone is familiar and he squeezes his eyes shut and turns his head away, as painful as it is to move even that much. He doesn’t want to watch Shen Qingqiu’s face as the man no doubt plans out exactly what to do with him once they return home.

The snap of an unfolding fan feels like being stabbed.

The scoff is salt in the wound and Shen Yuan silently counts to ten.

It is a very long journey back home.

Shen Yuan didn't miss the gauzy canopy of Qian Cao's medical beds. He glares at the stupid perfume bags and their stupid sigils, and does his very best to pretend he is alone in the room that might as well be *his* from how often he uses it.

As far as he is concerned, there is no Shen Qingqiu creepily looming in the corner waiting for Mu Qingfang. Because when someone else tried to attend Shen Yuan, the Scum villain spoke as if he would bite the guy's head off and throw the body into a composter.

So now they wait for Mu Qingfang.

Shen Yuan hopes he is taking care of Binghe. He hopes that he is checking on Ming Fan's meridians, or the sprained ankle that Ning Yingying managed to get on the stairs of the mountain.

It's *stupid* that Shen Qingqiu won't let anyone else treat him. Especially when the man won't even talk to him anymore, not really. Snapped orders to shut up and sit still doesn't count. Even if they did, they have been so rare that Shen Yuan feels like he spent the trip back in forced isolation.

Binghe wasn't even allowed to ride close enough to say hi.

There has been no F-points and his B-points reward got fucking *halved* because the System is full of actual shit and says that him getting injured was not solving the 'mystery'.

Shen Yuan wants to bite something.

He should probably grow out of that habit.

But he *really* wants to bite something.

The door opens and Mu Qingfang steps in with a smile. Shen Qingqiu sulks in the corner, not sitting in any shadows but acting as if he is. Shen Yuan manages a smile of his own. It's easier with Mu Qingfang; the man never talks to him like he is an idiot *or* a child, unlike certain other Peak Lords. He doesn't think the man has ever lost his temper. He doesn't think that Mu Qingfang would let Shen Qingqiu lose his temper, either. Not like that. Not when he is there.

"This one greets Mu-shishu," Shen Yuan says.

"This one greets Shen-shizhi," Mu Qingfang replies, calm as always, "and greetings to Shen-shixiong," he adds, and Shen Yuan doesn't wrinkle his nose at how their names are paired

together, even if he wants to. Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

Rude.

“May this one borrow Shizhi’s wrist?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan nods and offers his hand. It makes the wounds on his arm sting, the movement pulling oddly at the skin.

Shen Yuan has been forced into short sleeves, and the small bandages are visible. He doesn’t want to look at his leg. That, he knows, looks even worse.

Mu Qingfang examines his meridians and then his wounds; he offers praise for how well they have been treated, to which the scum villain of course does not respond. He also says that the demon managed to *fracture* the bone it clawed at. Which is all kinds of fucked up and terrifying to think about, so Shen Yuan would rather not.

If not for Binghe or Shen Qingqiu, his leg could have been…

Shen Yuan averts his eyes from where Mu Qingfang redresses the wound. He fidgets with the blanket that lays folded next to him and tries to sit still and utterly fails. He wonders how long he will be staying on Qian Cao Peak. Surely he can be on bedrest back on Qing Jing? It’s… a leg. His leg. He broke it once in his other life, and then he mostly just sat at home. A giant wound from a demon trying to claw and eat him is totally the same thing, isn’t it?

“Where’s Ming Fan and Binghe? They were injured too, are they alright?” he blurts out instead of anything else.

“You are *not* in the position to ask about them!” Shen Qingqiu snaps like a whip cracking down, and Shen Yuan flinches so hard that his shoulder hits the bedpost. The sudden pain in turn makes sparks shoot from his fingertips, bursts of heat there and gone again.

Silence falls.

His heart keeps beating a rapid rhythm in his chest. He stares at Shen Qingqiu and the man stares back, face that same eerie blankness like when he- when he cut-

Shen Yuan’s breathing is a shuddering thing and too loud.

“Perhaps Shixiong should step outside for now,” Mu Qingfang says.

Shen Qingqiu’s face twists and Shen Yuan averts his eyes. He braces himself even as his chest feels too small for everything he needs it for. But then there is the sound of a door slamming shut.

When he dares to look up, Shen Qingqiu is gone.

“Does Shen-shizhi know what kind of demon it was?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan glances towards him. He still looks calm. Not at all as if Shen Qingqiu went from quiet to explosive. Not at all like Shen Yuan apparently can’t control his own qi once more.

Shen Yuan swallows.

“A- a parasite,” he says and looks away again as Mu Qingfang finishes looking over his wounds, “um, a Fear Catcher demon. They’re related to dream demons, but rely on… on humans to survive. Near impossible to detect because their demonic qi takes on the- the, um, the-”

Fuck.

Shen Yuan bites his lip, furious that the words won’t get past his lips.

“The same shape as the qi of a non-cultivating human, yes,” Mu Qingfang helpfully says and Shen Yuan gives a jerky nod. “This one has been told that you have a fondness for studying demons and beasts. Perhaps Shen-shizhi could tell this one more?”

Right. Right, he can do that. He even read about this demon in one of the books from the bamboo house. It was in the book on heart demons- the *actual* kind, not just the ones that were this world’s version of depression and anxiety and all that other stuff- and how these demons affect their victims. Plus there was that one chapter where one tried to look like Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe cut its head off.

It was after the Abyss, but before he took over Huan Hua Palace. Before the protagonist had managed to trap the scum villain. Before everything that happened after and before Yue Qingyuan–

“The victim sees what they expect to see,” Shen Yuan blurts out, “and- and usually the demon feeds briefly and moves onto the next victim before any good clues are left behind, um, it can be transferred through touch so- so when Ming Fan grabbed me, he probably... and- and they have minor mind reading powers, to pick the right thing. Person. They- they feed mostly by conversing with their victim but touch speeds up the process. But if they want a big boost to their power…”

Shen Yuan glances at his leg.

“So it felt cornered?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan is happy to meet his eyes. Eye. How much vision does Mu Qingfang have with the bad one? It looks fully blind, but is it? He nods. “Well, this Shishu is pleased to see that Shen-shizhi was not hurt more. And your friends are well,” he assures and some tension Shen Yuan hadn’t known he carried melts away. “Luo-shizhi had bruised ribs but will make a swift recovery. Ming-shizhi only needed a slight adjustment to his meridians.”

Mu Qingfang smiles.

“And Ning-shizhi will be put on bed rest until her ankle isn’t so swollen.”

“Oh, she will hate that.”

“Mm, she is very energetic.”

Shen Yuan huffs a laugh. He traces the pattern in the blanket, nail catching on a loose thread.

“How long will I have to stay here?” he dares to ask.

“I would prefer to keep you here for a week,” Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan sighs, “to keep an eye,” he winks with his bad one, and Shen Yuan’s sigh turns into a bitten off laugh, “on your meridians. Once I’m certain that you won’t qi deviate, I will let you return to your peak.”

That makes sense.

“Do… do I have to be alone?” he asks, cheeks warm, voice weak as he looks at the blanket. He feels so *stupid* for asking, like a child that can’t sleep without a nightlight. But he knows that seeing Lady Jia- fake or not- he knows that-

Sometimes, when Shen Yuan can’t sleep, it’s hard to know where he is. Until he looks to the side and sees Binghe sleeping next to him.

“For your better health, this one is certain an exception can be made,” Mu Qingfang says. “However, this Shishu will remind you that one should not depend too much on… others. Especially as you are reaching the age where you will be sent out on missions. I would advise that you take steps to lessen such reliance.”

“We do! We- we aren’t allowed to sit next to each other in class, or- or even do chores together.”

“Perhaps those rules could be softened once you are able to sleep without assistance.”

As if. If anything, Shen Qingqiu’s instinctive hatred for Binghe will probably end in them *never* getting to hang out. Perhaps that is shown on his face, because Mu Qingfang sighs.

“All will be well,” he ensures and reaches–

Shen Yuan jerks away, and then feels like an idiot for it. The man wasn’t reaching for his *head.* He was reaching for his shoulder, probably to give it a squeeze. The way he often does before he leaves.

“... it is alright, Xiao-Yuan,” the man softly says, “this one is not mad. Perhaps you can rest while this one informs your friends that you accept visitors?”

Shen Yuan’s throat feels too tight to answer.

So he nods instead.

Mu Qingfang smiles at him, and then leaves to do as he said he would. Because that is what Mu Qingfang is; honest and reliable and calm and-

And never judgemental.

Shen Yuan squeezes his eyes shut and lets himself flop back down onto the bed. He stares out the window and at the blue sky outside and wonders if it would be stupid to ask for Yue Qingyuan to visit.

For no reason, obviously.

The house is quiet.

The smell of ink and tea surrounds Shen Qingqiu as he writes down the report. A short one, no doubt, for he does not see a reason to linger on useless details. The demon was killed, useless disciples were injured and Ning Yingying slipped on the stairs of Cang Qiong Mountain.

Money was received and now he sits in an empty house.

Mu Qingfang encourages softness that needs to be whittled down; the beast has been allowed to share the bedroom with the child despite the clear need to encourage no such thing. Qi deviation will forever plague Shen Yuan, weakening him until he will be torn apart by the world itself.

Shen Qingqiu does not write that down in the report.

It is not something which the clerks of Qiong Ding Peak need to know. A weakness is a weakness, and he *does* intend to one day sharpen those soft edges into something useful. But he does not intend to tell others of such a flaw when it will affect him as well.

The demon took on a human face, but was killed shortly after, he writes and does not name the face it took. If not for the glaring target it would present he would, of course, tell Yue Qingyuan exactly what he had done.

Perhaps it would make him stop and reevaluate.

Perhaps there would be no more *Xiao-Jiu,* or any visits that eat up time that could be better used elsewhere. Shen Qingqiu does not linger on the words which the demon had spouted. He does not think of how easily Xiu Ya cut through the neck of Yue Qingyuan, aimed right at where a scar of Qi-ge had still been visible, a memento of breaking up fights between filthy children on filthier streets.

He puts aside the brush.

Shen Qingqiu drinks his tea and gazes at the flickering shadows which the candles cast. The house remains quiet; there are no whispers from the room he does not look at. No shuffling and bickering, nor the soft padding of feet across wooden flooring as the child goes to clean up the tea cups that had been used before and after their evening routine.

It is quiet.

Chapter End Notes

YQY: Oh Xiao-Jiu has returned? I do so hope that the mission went well! I'm so proud of Xiao-Yuan for completing his very first mission-
MQF: Shen Yuan nearly lost his leg and will be held under observation for at least one week due to qi deviation.
YQY:
MQF: I am certain that Shen-shixiong will explain more in his report.

Report: We found the demon. It died.
YQY: *hanging onto sanity by his fingernails*

Hello!!! Sorry for the delayed chapter! I was sick, but I'm all better now <3
My update schedule might still be a bit rocky going forward- the closer to Christmas we get, the more I have to do at work. But as always I'll do my very best to update each monday :D

Btw, it was very difficult to write a fight scene from the pov of a child who was laying down, suffering from blood loss and going into shock OTL
Let's just pretend it was actually super cool and descriptive and that SY totally knew what was going on.

You can find me on tumblr as Grubus!

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luo Binghe opens his eyes.

On the other side of the room, there is the window. Through it he can see that the sky has only just begun to take on the hint of golden light that heralds the sun's approach, and Luo Binghe slowly blinks more awake as he watches the mist lingering by the mountain tops shine like silver clouds where the sunlight hits.

There are two beds in the room, but they may as well be one.

The moment they knew that no more visitors would arrive, healers included, Luo Binghe had pushed the guest bed close enough that the frames touched. Shen Yuan had been red faced by it, but he had made no protest. Luo Binghe knew they had both slept awfully at the Singing Dragon in the city, after all.

And that was *before* he saw Shen Yuan–

He squeezes the hand in his. Shen Yuan's fingers twitch, but his friend doesn't wake up. He always sleeps deeply, though not always consistent. It was deep and through the night, or mere glimpses of sleep where Luo Binghe knew that Shen Yuan had spent too much of the night reading in the candle light.

Luo Binghe takes a moment to watch the other boy.

Shen Yuan's cheek is squished against his pillow. There is a lock of inky black hair stuck to his lips, slightly parted and maybe drooling. Luo Binghe uses his free hand to carefully tug the hair away. His reward is a light snuffle as Shen Yuan twitches before settling back down. His friend likes to curl up, tucking in close for warmth. It must be difficult, not being able to move as much with a leg that was nearly…

Luo Binghe doesn't think he will ever forget it. How Shen Yuan had crumpled to the ground, his pupils blown so wide that he could hardly see the green in Shen Yuan's eyes. Pale and gasping, that shadow-like demon digging its claws into him. Making him scream.

Slowly, he wraps his arm around Shen Yuan. He does not let go of the hand holding his other one, even though his arm is tingling with the soon-numb feeling of not moving a limb often enough. It is worth it to keep Shen Yuan close.

To feel how his best friend's chest moves as he breathes. To know that he is still alive and there, and not screaming in an alleyway because Luo Binghe was too slow.

Normally he would go to the communal kitchen and make breakfast for them both, because

Shen Qingqiu had made it clear he could not use the kitchen in the bamboo house. But Luo Binghe doesn't know where to go on Qian Cao Peak. He does know, however, that food will be served to Shen Yuan eventually. So he stays and burrows his face against Shen Yuan's shoulder and focuses on how they are both there.

By the time Shen Yuan stirs to life, the sky has begun to become blue and Luo Binghe can hear the entire peak waking up, though Qian Cao does not seem as peaceful as Qing Jing even during the night.

"Good morning, Yuan," he says as Shen Yuan lifts his head.

A bleary-eyed stare is his only response.

Luo Binghe waits, smile growing wider as Shen Yuan slowly blinks before reaching out, his hand clumsy as he pats Luo Binghe's head.

"Binghe," his friend mumbles, and lets his head fall back down onto the pillow. It's hard to not laugh at it, and Luo Binghe sees no reason to stifle it. It earns him another sleepy stare, and he adores the confused smile that Shen Yuan gifts him, too sleepy to be flustered or annoyed.

"Yuan shouldn't fall back asleep," he says and Shen Yuan groans, rubbing at his eyes and yawning wide enough that Luo Binghe is reminded of the demonic snakes that his friend has read about recently.

Some of them, Shen Yuan had told him with great delight, could eat a whole cow and still be hungry. Some could *fly.* But mostly, Luo Binghe thinks of the small ones that unhinge their jaws to eat eggs bigger than their heads. Those, Shen Yuan had said, weren't even demons.

He huffs a laugh and sits up and ignores how his ribs ache. The movement makes Shen Yuan whine in protest. Hands grab at him, and Luo Binghe catches both to give a squeeze.

"Wake up," he says, and there it is. The sleepy glare of Shen Yuan, like a scruffy kitten pulled away from its warm nest. Green eyes narrowed and cheeks pink from sleep, further enhanced by a pout. Luo Binghe grins. Shen Yuan's glare grows stronger, though not more awake.

"Ugh," his friend complains, and Luo Binghe helps him sit up.

It is an awkward endeavor. The wounded leg can't be moved too much and Shen Yuan mumbles complaints about how sore his arms are, but there are plenty of pillows to pile on top of each other until Shen Yuan can lean against them. Luo Binghe is allowed the rare privilege of very, very quickly smoothing down Shen Yuan's hair in barely there strokes, not ever letting his fingers sink into it.

He makes sure to stop when Yuan's hands twitch.

As Shen Yuan begins to grumble and complain, Luo Binghe watches and listens and helps make sure they both look respectable. But he also thinks about how his best friend shouldn't

need help with all of it. He shouldn't have to rely on his Binghe like this, not that Luo Binghe minds.

But it would be different if it was a *choice.*

In the corner, their swords are resting against a sword stand. Gold and silver, sun and moon. Luo Binghe looks at them and thinks about how he had to let Shen Qingqiu save them both. How he had to let Ming Fan treat Shen Yuan's wounds, because he hadn't yet learned.

He will grow stronger, Luo Binghe decides as he moves his bed away from Shen Yuan's, just in time before their food arrives.

He will grow stronger and nothing will ever hurt Shen Yuan again.

Especially no demons.

"Xiao-Yuan," is the first thing that Yue Qingyuan says as he steps into the room. His black robes move with him in a perfectly natural way and not at all like unfolding curtains at a theater.

Shen Yuan doesn't realize he hasn't replied until the man has sat down and is giving him a look of pure concern, one that reminds him of a dog pleading for attention.

"This one wishes gege a good morning," Shen Yuan says.

The worry on Yue Qingyuan's face doesn't *fully* go away, but there is a gentle smile and Shen Yuan will count that as a win.

"This one apologizes for not having visited until now," Yue Qingyuan says, as if he isn't the sect leader and didn't show up the very second that Luo Binghe was forcibly dragged off to classes. Because bruised ribs are, somehow, not an excuse to skip.

Insanity.

"Gege is busy," Shen Yuan replies and fidgets with his blanket, wishing he could do *something.* Normally when he meets Yue Qingyuan, they are both walking. There is a destination and a time limit and it's not that Shen Yuan minds, of course, that there isn't one now.

But his eyes keep catching onto Yue Qingyuan's throat and his face and it's just-

“Has gege spoken with Shizun?” he blurts out, and Yue Qingyuan’s smile *shifts,* just a bit. It is the smile that the demon used, but not quite. Just close enough to notice.

The demon had said some weird things. The memory is hazy, something that Shen Yuan can barely grasp at. Blood loss is, apparently, fucking awful if you want to remember important conversations. But what he does remember makes no sense.

Yue Qingyuan wouldn’t say such things.

“Not yet,” Yue Qingyuan replies and then there’s a mandarin in his hand, and he begins to peel it. Shen Yuan stares at it, because the fuck? But right, there are qiankun pouches and sleeves and other cool things he has yet to earn the privilege of.

But also, why the fuck would the sect leader pull one out? Why would he keep fruit in his cool inventory space?

The scent is nice, though. More and more of it fills the air as golden-orange peels are discarded onto the breakfast tray that has yet to be retrieved, the white insides a bright spot against the brown bowls.

Shen Yuan watches and finds it oddly soothing, the way Yue Qingyuan peels.

It’s just so normal, the way he does it. He even carefully removes the fuzzy bits that don't come off with the peel. *Nice technique,* Shen Yuan praises in his head, because the fuzzy bits are the worst.

“Xiao-Jiu has filed a report on the mission,” Yue Qingyuan says, and then he puts a slice in Shen Yuan’s hand, and oh.

Oh, Yue Qingyuan is peeling it for *him.*

As Shen Yuan blinks at the speed of light because his eyes suddenly feel very hot and that’s embarrassing, Yue Qingyuan cradles the fully peeled mandarin in his hands and continues to speak.

“But this one has not yet been able to speak with him. Has he not visited Xiao-Yuan?” he asks, voice soft and Shen Yuan shoves the slice into his mouth in lieu of answering.

But Yue Qingyuan is patient.

His worst and best trait, which sadly the Scum villain would probably agree on. Agreeing on anything with that man feels odd.

“... this one was just wondering,” Shen Yuan mumbles once he can’t pretend to be chewing anymore, and then there is another slice put in his hand. It is soft and squishy and bright orange, and Shen Yuan rolls it around in his hands as he delays, “Shizun was here when-when we arrived, but this one hasn’t seen him since.”

“Would Xiao-Yuan like it if this one asked Shen Qingqiu to visit?”

“Oh! No, no, it’s fine, this one wouldn’t want to bother–”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Yue Qingyuan says, not quite dropping the formal speech so much as throwing it across the room as he continues with a wider smile, eyes brightening, “I must visit Xiao-Jiu either way. I’ll tell him his favorite disciple misses him.”

I’ll fucking die!!!!! Shen Yuan doesn’t scream.

“Please don’t,” he whines the way that used to work on his big brothers, hoping against hope that it might delay his inevitable death, “I just- I messed up during the mission, and he’s mad, we should let him calm down first! Please.”

“The report did not mention Xiao-Yuan other than the injuries,” Yue Qingyuan says and gives Shen Yuan another piece of mandarin. There are now two pieces in his hand and Shen Yuan looks at them.

“... really?”

“Yes. So whatever mistake Xiao-Yuan made, it can’t be the reason Xiao-Jiu is angry. I know you are tired, but would you like to… talk about it?”

Yue Qingyuan says it in such a way that Shen Yuan thinks about the Scum villain. It is said with great reluctance trying desperately to *not* come off as such, like someone who tried to not be overdressed for a casual hang-out and instead showed up looking like they were dressed for a funeral.

He stares at the man who smiles gently and Shen Yuan has the awful, horrible realization that Yue Qingyuan is just as bad at talking about uncomfortable things as Shen Qingqiu is.

The difference is that he smiles during it.

And doesn’t speak as if he is fully capable of killing people with words alone.

“Um, no,” Shen Yuan says because he *also* doesn’t want to talk about his dumb mistakes and why he pissed off Shen Qingqiu.

(+5 F-points!)

That’s probably a bad sign.

But it’s one he is happy to ignore, and instead Shen Yuan tries to convince Yue Qingyuan to return with books next time, and he eats the mandarin and does not stare at the thin scar at Yue Qingyuan’s neck, right where Shen Qingqiu’s sword had–

“Does gege want the money back?” Shen Yuan asks, and Yue Qingyuan chuckles.

“Xiao-Yuan can keep it,” he says, “were you able to buy something?”

Shen Yuan thinks of a ribbon with birds and nods.

Being stuck in bed is the most boring thing in the world.

That very first time when he sprained his foot thanks to Zhao De was nothing in comparison; then he was stuck in the dorms, and the dorms always had people going in and out. Ning Yingying had been eager to sneak in to bother him and Luo Binghe had made sure to drop by every time he had even a second of room to do so and there had been books to read when there had been no people, and that weird spider to stare at when the words all ran together.

Now he isn’t even allowed to practice with his qi.

Mu Qingfang gives him a proper scolding for it when he catches Shen Yuan trying to use it to pull Fu Yue closer. He does so while adjusting meridians and pouring his own qi into Shen Yuan’s, that *disappointment* in his voice more effective than any slap could ever be.

But he did take some pity and left a book on plants used for medicine.

Shen Yuan wonders if Shen Qingqiu would protest seeing that. Would he accuse Mu Qingfang of trying to steal his disciple, the way he does whenever Wei Qingwei tries to convince the man to let Ning Yingying drop by for dual wielding lessons?

Or did Shen Yuan fuck up so bad that the Scum villain would just hand him over? Was he *that* useless? Did the klutz routine of his stupid fucking body finally fuck him over one too many times?

Shen Yuan uses his finger to trace the perfectly rendered art of herbs that never existed back in a different time, and he is fine.

Shen Qingqiu won’t throw him away, he thinks, because he can’t let the man do so. It would be bad. What would happen to the plot, to Binghe?

It would be so bad.

“Did you see Shizun?” he asks Binghe.

The other boy finishes pushing the bed against his and climbs in. Shen Yuan reaches and as always, Binghe sits obediently as Shen Yuan braids his thick curls into something more manageable for sleep.

“I didn’t,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan–

“Oh,” he says, and continues to braid.

“... Yuan,” his friend says, “I won’t let anything hurt you again. Or anyone,” Binghe adds, and it should be reassuring. It *is* reassuring. It is also a bit confusing, because honestly, what brought that up?

“Thank you, Binghe,” he says and gives the thick braid a tug to show that he was done, “I’ll… well, I don’t know how good I am at protecting,” he bitterly admits, “but I’ll always support you in all your endeavors. Um. And it’s not- it’s not your fault the demon- well. It’s fine!”

Luo Binghe catches his hands.

Their eyes briefly meet, and Shen Yuan has to look away.

It’s not *fair*. Binghe’s eyes are so dark, so intense, and it digs at everything that Shen Yuan doesn’t want him to know. It’s bad enough that he knows about the stupid brand and what it is, does he have to peer into Shen Yuan’s very soul as well? To see how stupid and weak he is, despite truly *trying* to learn how to fight?

“I’m going to kill every demon I can find,” Luo Binghe swears.

“Don’t do that,” Shen Yuan says and forces himself to meet Binghe’s eyes once more, frowning as he does, “not *all* demons are bad.”

Luo Binghe doesn’t look very convinced.

“They are people, just like us.”

“Yuan–”

“They *are!* And they’re cool, too, you know. I’ve read about their culture- well, cultures, there’s multiple, it’s fascinating and- and you can’t just assume every demon is like the one that we… you can’t.”

Luo Binghe still looks stubborn and utterly unconvinced. He gives Shen Yuan’s hands a squeeze. Shen Yuan huffs.

“If we just *talked* with them, maybe we could actually stop fighting.”

“They literally eat people. And this one *hurt you.* Badly! You didn’t see- I didn’t, it’s not- I was *useless-”* and the words fail to form and suddenly Binghe looks too close to tears. Not the fake ones, the ones he uses to bully Shen Yuan with sometimes even though they both know they are fake.

These look too real.

Shen Yuan tugs him into a hug, arms clumsy and heavy but able to wrap around anyway. He feels Luo Binghe hug him back, face against his neck. He can also feel his friend lose the battle, tears falling and entire body shaking. Shen Yuan’s heart clenches.

“I survived,” Shen Yuan says and refuses to think about anything but that, “thanks to you, Binghe.” The other boy sobs, and Shen Yuan hugs him tighter and refuses to cry as well.

They fall asleep at some point, still hugging.

Ming Fan looks tired.

His hair is in a neat bun and his clothes are without wrinkles. But his face is paler than normal, dark circles under his eyes and as he comes to an awkward stop by the bed, his constant frown is just a tiny bit less severe. Like he is wearing it out of habit.

“Here,” Ming Fan says and dumps a pile of scrolls onto the table next to the bed, having hurriedly been moved back into its original spot before Binghe had to run back to Qing Jing, “homework. Luo-shidi said you were bored.”

“To you?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

“I have ears!” Ming Fan hisses and puts his hands on his hips. He towers over Shen Yuan in a way that is a poor attempt at intimidation. Mostly he reminds Shen Yuan of a fussy grandma. “I heard him tell Xiao-shimei!”

Would probably be mean to point that out.

What with the white hair.

“She’s your *only* shimei now,” Shen Yuan dares to point out instead of the hair, reaching for one of the scrolls to take a peek, “she’s not even the littlest one.”

“You nearly got your leg ripped off, stop talking back to me. I’m your Shixiong,” Ming Fan

grumbles and sits down in a nearby chair. He presses the heel of his palm against one eye and groans.

Shen Yuan has been stuck on Qian Cao Peak for three days and Ming Fan looks like he is ready to retire at the age of sixteen.

"... why is there calligraphy here," Shen Yuan says and stares at the scroll telling him to replicate what it says, "why- I can't practice calligraphy here! I'll get ink *everywhere."*

"That is not this one's problem," Ming Fan says and sits up straight, giving the door a wary glance, as if someone will enter. Perhaps he heard people pass- Ming Fan is further along his cultivation, after all. His hearing is probably better than Shen Yuan's.

"This one was happy with the books," Shen Yuan replies, because if Ming Fan decides that it's time to be formal, sure, why the hell not. They both have white hair for a reason. Sure, Ming Fan has *more,* but–

"Shizun won't let anyone into the house and the library won't let books be removed from the peak," Ming Fan says and Shen Yuan's eyes snap to him.

"Shizun won't what?"

"He's *busy.* Writing reports," Ming Fan defends, "and other things! Shizun is a very busy man, you know. You *should* know. Isn't Shidi the one who lives there?"

Probably should be 'lived' since Shen Qingqiu hasn't visited.

Shen Yuan looks at the scroll of calligraphy. It's made by one of the other masters, not Shen Qingqiu.

"He's… this one is…" Shen Yuan stutters and halts his words before he can get anywhere with them. He bites his lip and lets the scroll roll back up in his lap.

Silence falls and settles in like a shoe too small, pinching toes and numbing feet. His heart feels oddly cold and Shen Yuan knows his hands aren't itching and burning with qi, but he almost wishes they were.

He shouldn't *care* that Shen Qingqiu is mad.

Yue Qingyuan said he wasn't, but obviously he is. Not even Ming Fan is allowed inside, and the Scum villain always seemed perfectly happy shoving the most boring work at his head disciple. He still hasn't visited, either. Not even to yell.

"Don't cry," Ming Fan says in a horrified voice, and Shen Yuan glares at him and ignores how much his own eyes burn.

"I'm not," he says through clenched teeth, and then he points at the bag by Fu Yue, a small pouch with the belongings that survived the demon, "give me that. Please. Shixiong."

Ming Fan eyes him like he is a live grenade or an explosive talisman, but when Shen Yuan continues to not cry, the older boy reluctantly gets up to grab the bag. He doesn't throw it, which is a surprise. Instead he puts it in Shen Yuan's lap in a slow, careful way that implies he thinks a too harsh impact might break Shen Yuan's dumb, fragile body.

"There," Ming Fan says, and frowns at Shen Yuan's hair, "you need to brush it, you know. Your hair. My Shidi should not look so unkept. It's a mess, this one has seen bird nests look smoother!"

"Arms hurt," Shen Yuan says, and when Ming Fan looks tempted to do something about it, Shen Yuan hurries to pull out the ribbon.

The green is darker than he remembers, but still lovely. Tiny pale birds flying across the silk of it, if it is silk. It *feels* like silk, but he forgot to ask what the material was. As it is, the dark green shimmers against the sunlight that pours through the window.

It is very pretty.

Silently, Shen Yuan holds it out to Ming Fan.

"Perfect," Ming Fan says and accepts it, except then he reaches for *Shen Yuan,* and he yelps in his hurry to lean away from the reaching hands, his own flying up to cover his hair.

Ming Fan pulls back and scowls.

"This one has to touch you to tie it back!" he scolds.

"It's not for- I bought it for *you,"* Shen Yuan snaps and leans as far away as his leg lets him, "it's yours, Shixiong!"

Ming Fan stops.

He looks down at it and blinks.

"What?" he says, and then Ming Fan holds the ribbon closer, as if truly looking at it. Shen Yuan warily watches as he presses a finger to one of the tiny birds, his eyes wide, before they glance at Shen Yuan.

They stare at each other for a moment.

"At the market?" Ming Fan asks.

Shen Yuan nods.

"Oh." Ming Fan looks at the ribbon again, and then frowns, "why?"

"That's rude," Shen Yuan mutters and feels his cheeks burn. He stubbornly looks down at his

hands and wills Ming Fan to drop it. He doesn't want to talk about Zhao De and being carried like a potato sack, or about how Ming Fan had done the worst job ever of telling Shen Yuan that he was safe afterwards.

Can't the guy just figure that out on his own?

Some things are better left unsaid.

By some miracle, Ming Fan seems to actually figure it out. Or perhaps he decides it *is* rude to ask, and when Shen Yuan dares to glance up, the older boy has pink cheeks.

But he is also letting his hair loose and Shen Yuan stares with wide eyes as Ming Fan moves to a nearby bronze mirror and quickly ties his hair up once again, the dark green shining against it. It brings some attention to the white in it, but not in a bad way.

"There," Ming Fan says and clears his throat, "this one accepts the gift. It is- it is adequate." He doesn't look at Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan smiles and ducks his head to hide it.

The moon shines through the window.

It makes the room turn silver and blue, and Shen Yuan wishes he could reach the book he had been reading during the day. But Binghe put it out of reach, maybe even on purpose.

It is such bullshit. Insomnia! As a cultivator! He should be immune to sleep in general and yet here he is, laying in bed, listening to the soft breathing of Binghe while he feels like he has gravel behind his eyelids.

Shen Yuan taps his fingers against the blanket.

Luo Binghe sighs and shuffles closer, and Shen Yuan doesn't mind being used as a teddy bear. He knows, horribly enough, that he has done the same. They really *should* sleep in different beds. It would be a good first step to- to the training that Mu Qingfang has mentioned.

He tilts his head until he rests his cheek against Binghe's head.

"System?" he whispers, "is- is there a way to see… relationship progression? With others?"

(Does Host want to know their current F-points?)

“No, I just want to know what my relationships are. Who- who hates me. Or likes me, maybe. That stuff. I can earn points, surely I can see that stuff too? Right?”

(This System is unable to show such a thing.)

Of course it is.

“I hate you,” he says.

(~(◕‿◕)~)

Shen Yuan scoffs and shuts it down with a swipe of his hand.

At the end of the week, Shen Qingqiu arrives.

He walks in behind Mu Qingfang and doesn’t say a single thing as the Peak Lord of Qian Cao double-checks on Shen Yuan’s healing. Magical medicine and constant qi exchanges means that Shen Yuan’s leg is not perfect but good enough to be moved, his meridians are back to normal and everything is-

Almost okay.

Shen Yuan would like to be happy about that. Though it’s hard to concentrate when Shen Qingqiu is looming like a creepy, green shadow in the corner as Mu Qingfang explains what medicine to use, how to use it and making sure that there’s written instructions for Luo Binghe, who isn’t there.

And throughout it all, there’s tension leaking into the room like some kind of invisible, toxic gas waiting for a match to be lit.

Eventually he can’t resist peeking at the Scum villain.

Green eyes meet his; Shen Yuan freezes, and he thinks maybe Shen Qingqiu grows still as well. They stare at each other, and he thinks he has made too much eye contact this week, but this is the worst one yet. Shen Qingqiu’s eyes are blank and unreadable and Shen Yuan suddenly feels nauseous.

“Very well,” Mu Qingfang says, stepping between them as he helps Shen Yuan get to the end of the bed, handing over a crutch, “your Shizun will help you to your peak,” he says in a pointed kind of way, offering a hand to Shen Yuan as he shuffles onto his own feet. “Shen-

shixiong will of course be careful as you two fly, will he not?"

It kind of sounds like he is warning Shen Qingqiu to not drop Shen Yuan on the way home. Which, uh. That sure is a thing! That he didn't know he had to worry about *until just now???*

Shen Qingqiu still hasn't said a word.

Not even an insult.

It makes his skin crawl, and Shen Yuan grips the crutch tighter. Maybe Mu Qingfang warned for a reason. Maybe there is a *risk.*

"Thank you, Shishu," Shen Yuan says instead of begging for his life, and then he does an awkward bow to Shen Qingqiu once he is standing up, wobbling slightly with the crutch, "this one greets Shizun," he adds.

"... stop wasting time," Shen Qingqiu says, cold as always, and Shen Yuan almost feels relief at the sound. Almost.

Shen Qingqiu picks up Shen Yuan's things with a scowl, everything disappearing into his sleeve like the magic trick it isn't in this world. Books, scrolls, Fu Yue and spare robes tucked out of sight.

Then he marches out and Shen Yuan releases a shuddering breath and hobbles after. It is an awkward journey as he tries to figure out how to handle the crutch, the tool different from what he had used in his other life. This one is clumsier, wood and leather rather than plastic and steel.

Of course, when they *do* finally reach the outside and a good spot to fly from, there is a whole new problem.

Xiu Ya hovers in the air and Shen Qingqiu steps onto it and Shen Yuan's hands start sweating.

He won't be able to stand up without the crutch, he knows. He needs the assistance, the supportive weight, but Shen Yuan knows that there is no way he will be able to stand on a flying sword while leaning against a crutch. Shen Qingqiu wouldn't even need to *lie* about not being the one to push him down into some chasm on the way home.

Shen Yuan stands and stares and is horribly aware of how busy Qian Cao Peak is, people constantly passing by. The curious glances dig into him like needles and pins but he can't- he doesn't know what to *do.*

"Get on," Shen Qingqiu orders.

Shen Yuan swallows.

"This one… this one doesn't know how- that is, um," and he watches as Shen Qingqiu's eyes

flick towards the obvious problem.

“This master will hold you,” Shen Qingqiu stiffly says.

What?

“What?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes.

“Get on,” he snaps, sharper than the blankness of before. Sharp enough that Shen Yuan suddenly finds himself standing on Xiu Ya, hugging the crutch to his as Shen Qingqiu wraps an arm around him.

It’s almost like a hug except how it really, really isn’t one.

But there is still an arm around him, and as they begin to fly, Shen Yuan has to lean back against Shen Qingqiu whether he wants to or not. He feels like a cardboard cutout, stiff and unwieldy. Meanwhile Shen Qingqiu’s arm feels like a band of iron that is reluctantly holding him in place. They fly through a blue sky and Shen Yuan feels his face burn even as nausea sticks to the back of his throat.

They fly past other cultivators and they fly slower than normal, Shen Yuan realizes, because he *has* flown with Shen Qingqiu before. A whole year ago, yes, but he remembers that the Scum villain had flown at a dizzying speed away from Qiong Ding Peak.

This is at the speed of a crawl.

Maybe he *won’t* be thrown into a chasm.

Shen Yuan doesn’t dare to speak as they fly, nor does he dare to move. But the nausea settles, his nerves calming.

By the time they land on Qing Jing Peak, he almost feels fine.

“Inside,” Shen Qingqiu orders and Shen Yuan hobbles into the bamboo house and hears the door shutting behind him. He shuffles to the side to let Shen Qingqiu pass and it feels like he should say something now.

Thank you? It’s nice to be back? Sorry for fucking up on the mission?

Do you want some tea???

Shen Yuan watches as Shen Qingqiu stalks over to his desk and sits down in an elegant, sweeping motion of green robes. Shen Yuan watches as the man unrolls a scroll and blatantly ignores him and he *needs to say something.* Anything!

“Um,” Shen Yuan forces out, and Shen Qingqiu’s eyes land on him once more. It forces the

words to a stop, but he can't give up. So Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and forces out, "does-does Shizun want- does Shizun want tea-?"

Shen Qingqiu's eyebrows twitch and his gaze becomes a glare as he pointedly looks at the crutch and how Shen Yuan has to lean against it to remain standing.

"You can't even stand by yourself," Shen Qingqiu says, and Shen Yuan's cheeks flushes at the derision in his voice, "how would you manage to carry a teapot? Don't be an idiot."

"Then," Shen Yuan says, "maybe this one could instead-"

"Stop speaking nonsense and go to your room," Shen Qingqiu snaps and Shen Yuan flinches.

"Yes, Shizun," he mumbles.

He avoids looking at the man as he hobbles to the sideroom. The sound of the crutch against the wooden floor is painfully loud, but Shen Qingqiu doesn't comment on it.

Eventually, Shen Yuan sits down on their bed.

He slowly breathes out. The crutch leans against the wall, and he sits and tries to make his heart slow down.

Hopefully Binghe will come soon, he thinks, and wishes he had remembered to ask for his books.

Chapter End Notes

NYY: A-Yuan is right. That spider IS weird.
LBH: wow, you really are bored.
NYY: it's not FAIR! Why must I be on bed rest HERE while YOU get to have a SLEEPOVER???
LBH, smug: This humble one doesn't know what Shijie is talking about-
NYY: *angry screaming*

meanwhile YQY is a god at avoiding awkward conversations as much as he's a god at starting them. Love a man of many talents <3

It's been raining so much here. Someone make it stop.

Linecrosser drew this amazing art from chapter 18! Warning for blood!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“May this disciple brush Shizun’s hair?”

Shen Qingqiu’s brush slides too far to the left; he looks down upon the hánzi now ruined, still readable but not good enough to have been written by one of Qing Jing, much less its Lord. He looks down upon the wet ink and does not see it, for what he had just heard must have been a hallucination and for a moment he wonders if he has, at last, simply gone mad. Perhaps it is a sign of an approaching qi deviation.

“Shizun?” the child asks, and Shen Qingqiu looks at him.

The brat is leaning on his crutch; all morning he has hobbled around with it, the *thump, thump* of each step hard to miss whether they were in the same room or not. The hair which had been a mess the previous day is now less so, most likely smoothed down by the beast before *that* brat left for classes.

This brat is staring at him, the eyes which match Shen Qingqiu’s looking wide and imploring, the once pale cheeks now ruddy with redness in a fierce blush. In the hand not holding onto the crutch, there is a comb.

So it had not been an auditory hallucination.

Shen Qingqiu stares. The child fidgets, wobbling slightly with it.

“Why would disciple Shen ask such a thing?” he bites out and puts away the brush, holding his sleeve out of the way to avoid any stains. The order he had been writing is discarded, but it is not one he must finish quickly. He will rewrite it later, once the child starts making sense again.

If that is possible.

“... this humble one would like to honor Shizun?” Shen Yuan tries, voice faltering in the obvious lie. Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrow. The child flinches, and Shen Qingqiu turns away to pour a new cup of tea.

Why the child cannot simply be quiet and remain in his room, he does not know. Perhaps Mu Qingfang has spoken with the boy about the nonsense the Peak Lord of Qian Cao often spouts and Shen Yuan is just soft enough to agree with it.

Perhaps it is a mistaken attempt to ensure that Shen Qingqiu won’t whip the other disciples.

“This master does not believe Shen Yuan has *ever* wished to do such a thing,” he says, “it is

certainly *strange* for such an attempt to be made now." Shen Qingqiu looks back at him.

The boy is staring at the floor now, face more red. Shen Qingqiu looks at how tightly the comb is held, at how stiffly the injured leg is positioned. At the poor attempt at hiding guilt.

"Did you break something?" he asks, and Shen Yuan's head jerks up to stare at him, "one would not think such a thing possible, considering the circumstances. However this master has seen disciple Shen perform the impossible before," he mocks, for the child's clumsiness is certainly a thing to behold.

"... does Shizun mean an object?"

"Obviously," Shen Qingqiu drawls. He puts down the cup he did not drink from and unfolds a fan, sparing himself from the view of such weakness. He looks out the window and considers the rain as it falls outside and does not glance towards the child who lingers.

"This one did not break anything, this one promises," Shen Yuan says and *thump, thump* steps closer. Shen Qingqiu does not grow still as he listens for the crutch to catch onto the carpet, nor does he twitch as the child does not fall but instead comes closer, "but- but would-may this disciple brush-?"

"No," he snaps and watches as the child startles back, nearly falling. But Shen Yuan catches himself.

Shen Qingqiu exhales.

"This master does not need *assistance* with such a task," he says once the child's breathing has calmed, "disciple Shen should spend his time studying rather than bothering his betters with such trivial matters."

Normally, the brat says something disrespectful. A goading tease or an attempt at snapping an insult. Normally there is a narrowing of green eyes or an unsuitably cheeky smile. Something which would have Shen Qingqiu snap his fan shut to smack the brat's arm or knee with it, whichever was closest.

Shen Yuan averts his eyes and bows as well as he can while clinging to his crutch.

"Yes, Shizun," the boy says and tucks the comb away before he inelegantly *thump, thumps* back to his room.

The door slides shut.

Shen Qingqiu's tea grows cold.

“Has Shen-shizhi had any signs of lingering qi deviation?” Mu Qingfang asks, his hand briefly brushing against Shen Qingqiu’s elbow to make him stay. The man does at least not *grab,* unlike what the brute of Bai Zhan has the habit of.

Shen Qingqiu does not answer Mu Qingfang at first; he watches as the other Peak Lords leave the meeting room, all of them terrible at pretending they are not dragging their feet to listen in. Shang Qinghua squeaks like a mouse and hurries past. Pathetic.

Not all of them have met Shen Yuan. The fact that they all *know* about the child speaks more of their own morals, and Shen Qingqiu’s fingers itch with the desire to form a sword seal, to cut out wagging tongues. He does not know how much they know, nor what rumors are running rampant.

It is maddening in ways he hates.

“No,” Shen Qingqiu says once they are alone in the room.

His voice echoes in it now when it is nearly empty. It is oval shaped, the walls curving in a way that matches the large table. The meeting room is a lofty thing, the walls draped with tapestries that tell the story of Cang Qiong Mountain’s founding and portrays the original Peak Lords. It is a room that is only accessible by flying, towering high above the whole mountain range. Enough so clouds sometimes obscure the sight of their sect.

The excuse is that it is for safety; Shen Qingqiu doubts anyone who lacks cultivation could ever reach Qiong Ding Peak to begin with and knows it is another form of bragging.

He snaps the fan closed and tucks his hands into his sleeves and moves so that his back is to the wall, eyes on the door.

“That is a relief,” Mu Qingfang sighs, his one eye becoming a crescent of golden brown when he smiles, “and has Shixiong done as this one suggested?”

“Shidi is certainly very *involved,”* Shen Qingqiu says and does not hide the mockery in his voice as he does, “with this one’s disciple. Does Mu-shidi not have disciples of his own to handle? This one had been led to believe that Mu-shidi had chosen new ones at the selection. Qi-shimei was very vocal about it.”

“Shen-shixiong knows why this one is so involved,” Mu Qingfang replies, not rising to the bait, “and is as well avoiding this one’s question.”

“The child hates me,” Shen Qingqiu says, “this one does not believe doing something as useless as *talking* will help. In fact, this one is certain it would only make the child hate this one more than before. Which this one would not mind, but Mu-shidi appears to seek a different result.”

“Shixiong, this one does not believe that Shen-shizhi hates you,” Mu Qingfan says and Shen Qingqiu scoffs, “the child is, perhaps, frightened. But as this one has said before, only a show of comfort and honest intention will settle such things. And it is *important* to do so considering how often Shen Yuan deviates due to the way his qi overflows-”

“Because he is *weak.”*

Mu Qingfang looks at him.

Shen Qingqiu glares; the Lord of Qian Cao Peak does not yield.

“He asked for his Shizun,” Mu Qingfang says and Shen Qingqiu averts his eyes as Mu Qingfang continues, “every day, in many different ways. This one believes he would be comforted by any show of goodwill from Shixiong.”

“You presume so many things,” Shen Qingqiu snaps and steps away from the wall, “and yet all of it is useless. Was that all, Shidi, or can this one go and attend more important things than listen to unwanted advice?”

“... this one would like to examine Shixiong’s meridians, as Shixiong did not let this one do so after the mission.”

“There is no need. Goodbye, Mu-shidi.”

Shen Qingqiu slams the door shut behind him.

There is a bench right outside the bamboo house.

It is made of stone and looks old enough to be put in a museum. Smoothed out by time, with little scratches on the sides that might have once been vandalism. It is fun to imagine that some daring disciple once scratched their names into it, so long ago that one can’t even read them anymore. A tiny bit of humanity.

Shen Yuan has never seen Shen Qingqiu use it.

It’s a nice bench. Sitting on it, he can see most of the peak. The green and white of disciples wandering the stairs and plateaus of Qing Jing, the masters who fly in on their sword like colorful birds. Sometimes new colors show up, visitors from other peaks, usually for the library but sometimes just to visit friends (or enemies, he can *see* that fucking Bai Zhan visitor over there bee-lining for the training grounds) And it’s like-

Shen Yuan has lived in this world for years and years, but he has only ever seen cultivators be *cultivators* since he joined the sect. And he watches these people fly on *fucking swords* and finds himself wondering if he's just having the most detailed dream of all time.

Would it be a nightmare or a dream? Is someone about to randomly turn into a dragon, or is he suddenly going to be forced to hold a presentation while naked? There are people! Flying! On swords!

And he could join them??? The fuck???

Well, not now. But when his leg is better.

Shen Yuan wonders where he would even wake up, if it was a dream. Would he wake up in a world where fridges and microwaves existed? Or would there instead be a room cramped with beds and even more cramped with other slaves? Would he–

There is Binghe, and Shen Yuan opens his mouth to shout a greeting. But then he remembers that Shen Qingqiu is inside the house, right by the window that Shen Yuan is sitting so close to.

So he waves instead, because he can't afford to piss off the man. Not more than he already has; just moving about makes Shen Qingqiu tense like a bristling cat, and Shen Yuan is kind of expecting to get his crutch kicked out from under him any day now.

Binghe doesn't wave back; he's carrying a tray, and Shen Yuan wonders what food he cooked for the day. But Binghe *is* speeding up, so that must mean there is no soup and no risk of spilling. Shen Yuan had spilled tea that morning. He doesn't know if the Scum villain even noticed. He hadn't been punished for it.

Shen Qingqiu won't let Shen Yuan brush his hair.

Which is *fine,* obviously. The idea of actually doing it makes Shen Yuan feel weird and as such it's best to not linger on that. But he also won't let Shen Yuan pour them both tea, he isn't letting him help with *anything.* The closest Shen Yuan has gotten to a resemblance of normal is the return of their routine, of Shen Qingqiu pressing his hands to Shen Yuan's back and pouring energy into him.

So the guy isn't mad enough to risk Shen Yuan dying.

Or maybe he just doesn't want him to blow up more furniture.

And then Binghe is there, fussing as always. Shen Yuan doesn't have to force his smile, because he *always* smiles around Binghe. It is a relief to focus on things like food and asking about classes and how bored Ning Yingying must be, still not allowed to walk.

"Did you know Shen Qingqiu is going into the Ling Xi caves?" Luo Binghe asks and Shen Yuan drops his plate.

FUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Despite the fact that he knows that Luo Binghe is *the protagonist* and that Shen Qingqiu is the fucking *scum villain*–

Shen Yuan still absolutely forgot the timeline. Perhaps he can blame it on how he muted the System as much as he possibly could. Except the System doesn't show him much when he takes a peek, anyway, probably because according to Shang Qinghua he's a 'goddamn self-insert' and maybe the System just doesn't see why he would want to know shit.

But it's correct, isn't it?

Shen Qingqiu *did* go into the caves when Luo Binghe was fourteen. It had then shown a year of Binghe being given more freedom as he was finally allowed out onto night hunts and missions, away from the sect when the Scum villain couldn't evilly keep him away from the opportunities such things offered.

And then he had returned to the news of a dead peak lord.

And yeah, at the time, it had been written off as an accident, Shen Qingqiu the sole witness to such a tragedy. But then years later the truth had been unraveled and…

Look, Liu Qingge fucking sucks.

He kicked Binghe in the face.

But Shen Yuan doesn't think the guy deserves to die. And he has met Liu Mingyan enough times to know that she is just as good of a person as the original claimed. Her big brother is a rude bitch but that doesn't mean that Liu Mingyan deserves to lose him.

Not that it matters.

It's not like Shen Yuan can do anything about it, is there? He's fourteen and a disciple and got a leg that just two weeks ago was nearly ripped off of his body. He can't just tell the scum

villain to *not go.*

He definitely can't tell Liu Qingge the same.

Could he ask Yue Qingyuan to say no? Does the man put Shen Yuan's opinion and desires above Shen Qingqiu? Obviously not. He remembers reading those sections in the original, feeling like he would go insane whenever the cool Yue Qingyuan just folded to Shen Qingqiu like a goddamn leaf. He still doesn't know why that is a thing. The demon didn't clear anything up, either. If anything, its words made things seem more muddled than ever.

Shen Yuan lays awake that night and stares at the ceiling. Luo Binghe's arm is thrown over him, cuddling close but still careful of his injuries even in sleep. The house is silent. Shen Yuan traces the stitched pattern of Binghe's sleeve, a barely-there-tug as he thinks.

Why didn't Shen Qingqiu tell him?

He stares and stares and realizes that he might be more upset about that part than the rest. Which is stupid. Shen Qingqiu is still obviously pissed off at him, why would he bother telling Shen Yuan anything?

He never did before.

"Does Shijie know that Shizun is leaving?" he asks.

Luo Binghe looks up from where he is folding their clothes; Shen Yuan had offered to help, but his friend politely denied him. And it was too much of a bother to get out of bed with his stupid leg, so Shen Yuan hadn't bothered putting up too much of a fight.

Instead he is taking care of Fu Yue, the blade humming reassuringly as he drags an oiled cloth over it.

"For the caves?" Binghe replies, "yes, she was the one who told me."

"How did *she* know before I did?" Shen Yuan asks and it totally doesn't come out as a whine. He is a very mature fourteen year old whose voice hasn't begun to crack yet. He has dignity.

"It is not Yuan's fault if Shen- *Shizun,"* Binghe corrects himself at the glare Shen Yuan sends him, because Shen Qingqiu may not be in the house at the moment but one can never know how close he is, "does not tell him of such things. It is Shizun."

Luo Binghe's dark eyes narrow into slivers of obsidian.

“Why does Yuan care so much?” he asks, and Shen Yuan averts his eyes, “I heard seclusion in the caves can last for months and even years. Is that not good? Yuan said Shizun was angry with him.”

“But if he leaves, how can I make him *stop* being angry at me?” Shen Yuan asks, sliding Fu Yue back into its sheath, putting it aside as he continues, “what if it gets worse? What if he- what if he leaves the caves and kicks me out of the sect, Binghe?”

“Then Zhangmen-shibo will take us both in,” Luo Binghe says with utmost certainty, “because I will go where Yuan goes.”

Shen Yuan flops back into bed and hides his burning face behind his hands, groaning.

“Stop,” he says, “that’s not the point! And Shizun would be even angrier if we left Qing Jing for a different peak, it would make everything worse.” Even if he hated Shen Yuan’s guts, the Shen Qingqiu of the books would *never* share his disciples. That was just too OOC!

Binghe mutters something so low that Shen Yuan can’t hear it.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan parts his fingers enough to glare at the protagonist, who happily ignores it in favor of folding an outer robe so perfectly it might as well be a video tutorial example for housewives, “I just think you’re worrying too much, Shixiong.”

Shen Yuan grabs a pillow and throws it.

It flops harmlessly to the floor.

“Does Yuan want to try again?”

“Shut up!”

“System, is there a way to stop Shen Qingqiu from going to the caves?”

(Canceling the Ling Xi Caves: Character Development! Is not possible for Host, as it does not pertain to Host’s own plotline.)

“How does it *not* affect me? That’s bullshit!” he snaps, slamming his book shut to glare at the blue screen before him, “What else am I supposed to use all these fucking points for? You did

see that Shen Qingqiu and I share a resemblance, right? Of course it affects me if he *murders* someone!"

(Host is allowed to affect events of Ling Xi Caves; Host is not allowed to cancel the event in its entirety.)

Wait.

"Wait, so- what does that mean? I can… so I can prevent the murder? Maybe? How?"

(Host could exchange 5000 B-points to alter the storyline with carefully selected dialogue options.)

Shen Yuan's hope, which had foolishly risen, promptly crashed and burned. He stares at those points, and then at his current ones. He had been dangerously low on B-points by the time he reached the sect because the System was a *bitch,* and he has been struggling to earn more ever since he joined.

Even with the F-points, he is too far away from the goal.

Shen Qingqiu is leaving in *days.*

"That's not fair," he says, and pushes the book away from him, hands trembling, "I don't even have h-half of that."

It's so blatantly rigged.

Shen Yuan stares up at the glossy sheen of it. As if it is made of glass, something he can break into pieces. But he knows it's not; it is air and nothing else, nothing he can grab and hold. Years ago, he had tried to hug it, young and foolish, treating the System like some kind of imaginary friend that could be trusted.

Now he wants to *break it.*

"Will preventing the Abyss cost even more?" he asks, clenching his fists, nails digging into his palms. At least there is no burning of qi. Mu Qingfang's exercises are giving results, he thinks, feeling like he is about to throw up, "are you going to make that unattainable as well?"

(Host does not have a mission related to the Abyss.)

Shen Yuan pauses.

"I don't… have anything related to the Abyss? Nothing at all? That doesn't- what *do* I have?"

(The Demon Invasion of Qiong Ding Peak is Available once Ling Xi Caves has been completed.)

“That’s it? I have to meet Sha Hualing, but I can’t prevent Liu Qingge’s death?” he asks, incredulous, “and what does not having a mission for the Abyss even mean? Does that mean Binghe doesn’t *have* to go into it? Is it an option now? Can we just skip the entire event and stay home?”

(Host does not have a mission related to the Abyss.)

Shen Yuan stares at repeated words.

“Oh,” he says, “you won’t tell me.”

He looks at his leg, still not healed enough to walk for long, not enough to fly on a sword without assistance. He sits there, by the table in the main room, alone for once.

Shen Yuan wishes he could speak with Shang Qinghua.

Shen Qingqiu has been doing more paperwork lately.

Now when Shen Yuan knows about the Ling Xi caves, it makes sense. The man must be preparing the peak for however long he will be gone; Shen Qingqiu must ensure no one thinks of having *fun,* after all. However, it also puts the man in a worse and worse mood each day.

Ming Fan scurries in and out of the house constantly, almost always with a green ribbon in his hair. A special errand boy, the paperwork apparently too important to shove off onto the head disciple.

As such when there is a knock on the door, Shen Qingqiu doesn’t even look up, perhaps assuming it is Ming Fan returning early.

So Shen Yuan hobbles over to open it, and is greeted not by the green of Qing Jing, but by the black robes of Qiong Ding. He tilts his head back to meet the brown eyes of Yue Qingyuan, the corner of the man’s eyes crinkling as he smiles.

“Is gege here to take Shizun away?” Shen Yuan blurts out before Yue Qingyuan can even open his mouth, and the man’s smile falters as he blinks once, bewildered.

“Take him away? Where would this be, Xiao-Yuan?”

“The caves,” Shen Yuan says, clutching at the door, “is- are you here to take him away now?”

Yue Qingyuan–

Goes blank.

Less for a second. But for that short moment, Shen Yuan looks at a blank face that is ever so slightly paler. And then the smile is back, and Yue Qingyuan shakes his head and gives his shoulder a squeeze, as if nothing is wrong at all.

“Shen Qingqiu will only ever enter those caves by his free will,” he promises firmly, though not harshly.

“And yet this one must seek permission for such an endeavor,” Shen Qingqiu says, and Shen Yuan jumps, having completely forgotten the man was in the room with them. His cheeks burn as he steps aside, letting Yue Qingyuan through the door at last.

“Permission that has been granted,” Yue Qingyuan goodnaturedly replies.

“Oh? So why is Zhangmen-shixiong here?” Shen Qingqiu asks in a voice similar to winter winds. Shen Yuan leans back against the wall, clutching at his crutch and not daring to take a step as Shen Qingqiu continues, rising from his desk, “if not here to retract yet another promise?”

Yue Qingyuan grows very still.

“... this one only wished to ensure everything is well,” he says, voice softer than before. He rubs his thumb against the pommel of Xuan Su. “Xiao-Jiu is of course still permitted into the caves.”

“So Shixiong is here to check up on *him?”* Shen Qingqiu says viciously and gestures at Shen Yuan who is, apparently, *not* doing a good job of melting into the wall. He ducks his head and stares at his feet, but Shen Qingqiu continues as he leaves his desk to walk closer, “has Shixiong at last admitted to the truth, and will now no longer bother this one for *smalltalk?”*

Shen Qingqiu comes to a stop before Yue Qingyuan.

The sect leader has not moved; he merely tilts his head down to keep eye-contact. Shen Yuan watches Shen Qingqiu’s knuckles grow white as he clutches his fan harder.

“This one treasures every moment with Shidi,” Yue Qingyuan replies.

“You wear guilt poorly,” Shen Qingqiu hisses, so low that Shen Yuan is just barely able to make out the words, “and Zhangmen-shixiong has *never* been a good liar.”

“This one is not lying,” Yue Qingyuan says in a low voice, his hand moving from Xuan Su. Fingers brush against Shen Qingqiu’s hand still holding the fan, “I always enjoy Xiao-Jiu’s company.”

Crack! rings through the room as the fan breaks.

Shen Qingqiu takes a sharp step back, hands hiding away in his sleeves as his face goes blank like an iced over lake, the green of his eyes mere slits of color.

“Zhangmen-shixiong is interfering with this one’s duties by paying a needless visit,” he says and whirls back around towards his desk, “he should leave so that this one may continue.”

Yue Qingyuan’s hand, which had still been reaching out, drops.

“Xiao-Jiu-”

“Shixiong visited to ensure the health of disciple Shen,” Shen Qingqiu cuts in, “and this one has obviously *not* beaten him, as Shixiong must have feared. So if there is nothing else, Shixiong can take his leave.”

Shen Yuan balls up his sleeves.

“Shizun,” he says, and stops, Shen Qingqiu’s glare vicious.

Silence falls.

It is only broken by the sigh of Yue Qingyuan; when Shen Yuan glances at him, the man’s smile remains, though less bright than before.

“Very well,” Yue Qingyuan says, and then he presses a mandarin into Shen Yuan’s hand, “this one will take his leave. Please take care, Shidi. Xiao-Yuan.”

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan mumbles and holds the mandarin to his chest.

Shen Qingqiu says nothing at all. Not until the door shuts once more, not until Shen Yuan can no longer hear Yue Qingyuan’s steps against the stone stairs outside.

Only then does the man look at him, green eyes like daggers pinning him in place, like a cat cornering a mouse. Shen Yuan’s heart beats faster and his breathing hitches.

“How did *you* know about the caves?” Shen Qingqiu demands.

“Um,” Shen Yuan holds the mandarin closer, as if it would be any protection at all, “I just- this one heard-”

“The little beast, then,” Shen Qingqiu decides, standing as tall as bamboo, tilting his chin down to grant Shen Yuan a sneer, “spreading gossip. This master had low expectations, and yet the beast does what beasts do and dig himself deeper.”

Shen Yuan’s nails dig into the skin of the mandarin.

“Binghe isn’t a beast,” he says, averting his eyes from the glaring man before him, “this one

begs Shizun to stop calling him such."

"Begging, are we? Has disciple Shen learned at last that raising one's voice does not ensure a victory in discussions? Or perhaps disciple Shen has begun to see that the boy *is* a beast, after all-"

"Don't talk about him like that!"

"Do not," Shen Qingqiu says and steps closer, towering above him, "interrupt."

Shen Yuan stares up at him and presses up against the wall behind him until his hairpin hurts against his scalp. For a long moment they stare at each other. Shen Yuan's heart beats too fast but he barely even dares to breathe.

And then Shen Qingqiu scoffs and steps away, dismissing him.

"Pathetic," he says, "this is why you are barred from missions until this master returns. You're too weak to be trusted with anything else but *reading."*

Shen Yuan blinks.

"What?" he asks, and his shoulders hurt from how tense he is, but he can't relax. Especially not now, with words that make no sense- "what does that mean?"

"Did the demon claw your brain out? Is it not obvious?"

Shen Yuan's face burns. The mandarin drips with how tight he squeezes it, but he can't make himself loosen his grip.

"I'm not allowed off the mountain? What about Binghe?" he weakly asks.

"The beast will be sent away on *many,"* Shen Qingqiu says and drops the broken fan down onto his desk, the clattering loud in the otherwise quiet house, "so that you will finally cease being so dependent on him."

His chest feels too tight. Lungs restrained, breathing growing shorter. Shen Yuan swallows back nausea and squares his shoulders.

"My qi deviations-"

"You will spend your nights with Mu Qingfang," Shen Qingqiu says, "when there is none but you here. And when he cannot spare the time for such *neediness,* he will entrust you to someone who can." Shen Qingqiu's eyes land on him once more and Shen Yuan flinches at the look on his face.

"Because," the man says with slow, awful casualness, the way a tiger prowls before it pounces, "you are nothing but a child who cannot even sleep alone. And instead of letting you face the consequences, this master must take action because we happen to share a face,"

he says, each word another clawed swipe.

“Is this because I messed up? On- on the mission-”

“What else could it be? Who else but you were injured?”

“Binghe’s ribs…”

“Compared to your leg? Don’t be ridiculous. If the boy was of *any* worth, he would have prevented it. He would have been there faster and he would have remembered his sword earlier. Instead he remains as useless as this master suspected he would always be, a beast who would do well to be whipped-”

The mandarin hits Shen Qingqiu in the shoulder.

It falls to the floor, leaving a stain behind. Shen Yuan’s hand is still out from where he threw it and at first he’s so fucking angry he doesn’t even care about what he just did.

And then Shen Qingqiu takes a step closer and Shen Yuan is suddenly too aware of the empty space between them. There is nowhere to hide and he can’t even *run* with his fucked up leg and Shen Qingqiu is coming closer, stepping past the squished fruit and this is it. This, finally, is the final straw, the wait over, and Shen Yuan doesn’t want to be whipped or tied down or beaten but at least he doesn’t have to *wait* for it anymore and–

Shen Qingqiu stops before him.

“Go to your room,” he says, face pale with rage and hands clenched into fists by his side, trembling with it.

Shen Yuan stares.

“My room?” he echoes.

“Are you deaf? Yes! Go to your *fucking room!”* Shen Qingqiu snarls, a sudden burst of shouted anger that should be terrifying.

Shen Qingqiu’s hands remain by his side.

“You’re not- you’re not going to whip me?”

Shen Qingqiu stares down at him and Shen Yuan’s heart is beating so fast it hurts, but- but he isn’t-

Shen Qingqiu’s face twists and then he is gone, the door slammed shut behind him and Shen Yuan stares instead at the mandarin on the floor. Fruit juices slowly seep from it, staining the floor with sticky sweetness that has coated his own hand. Shen Yuan looks at that hand, and he pictures the stain it left behind on Shen Qingqiu’s robes, a dark path against green and he wasn’t beaten.

Go to your room, Shen Qingqiu had snarled, angrier than Shen Yuan had ever seen him.

Go to your room, and nothing more.

“Oh,” he breathes, and for the first time since they returned from the mission, for the first time since he had to be saved from the demon–

Shen Yuan relaxes.

Giddy with relief, he sinks to the floor and starts giggling.

When Shen Qingqiu returns in the evening, clutching a new fan in his hand and walking like a wary cat as he steps through the doorway into his own house.

Shen Yuan smiles at him and pours their evening tea.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: why the fuck is that child smiling after I yelled at him? Is he not scared? Does he not HATE me???
SY in his head: I'm safe! I can ride this high forever! I'm SAFE! I'm safe around Shen Qingqiu! He's still a bitch but he is SAFE-!
SQQ: no self-preservation..... it will be a miracle if he grows stronger while I'm in the caves, ugh.

meanwhile:

MQF: I am very calm and normal about the opportunity to spend more time around Shen Yuan.
WQW: babe why are you gathering up books on the basics of cultivation healing? babe you've written a lesson plan-
MQF: Well I can't just let the boy sit around while he's here
WQW: I thought he would only be spending the NIGHTS here? And only sometimes?
MQF:
WQW: I knew this day would come. Come, let us go to a battlefield and adopt an orphan before Shen-shixiong claims you are stealing his disciples.

Ah, excitement. A year without Shizun, what can go wrong?
Thank you guys for reading as always! And I am so sorry I've become slower at replying to comments, but trust me I will try to get back to you as soon as possible! Yes even in earlier chapters <3
Just know I love it all.

Fanart! fanart!!! :D

misfitmonarchy drew the grumpy (totally not lonely) Shen Qingqiu all alone in his home from chapter 19 <3
the "i'm not upset, fuck you, YOU are upset" face is something I adore.

Linecrosser has drawn the mandarin peeling scene in chapter 20! I love how squishy SY's face is in it!!!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“First Shizun, now you?”

The words are said in a plaintive whine, so low that Luo Binghe can barely hear it above all the ruckus around them.

There are the sounds of people packing and arguing, Ming Fan’s voice rising above it all to call out orders. There are no horses from Xi Jiao Peak this time to add to the chaos, though perhaps chaos would be a too strong word for the way Qing Jing organizes. It is not even a very big group- he suspects Ming Fan is only there to wield his newfound power with Shen Qingqiu gone to the Ling Xi caves.

Instead of holding onto the reins of a horse, Luo Binghe can feel how Zheng Yang hums against his side even through its scabbard. A warm touch, like the sun pressing against skin. They are going to travel by sword to their destination. He is nervous about it.

But it is easy to forget his nerves when Shen Yuan stands next to him, forlorn and arms hugging Luo Binghe’s bag to himself, as if the other boy is considering whether he should hand it over or not. It makes Luo Binghe’s chest ache with fondness, and he can’t help but smile despite how clearly upset Shen Yuan is.

“I will be gone for at most a week,” Luo Binghe reassures him, because that is what Heng He told him and the other three disciples coming along.

Shen Yuan’s frown only grows deeper and he hugs the bag tighter.

“At least Binghe is saying goodbye,” he mutters, and Luo Binghe nudges their shoulders together, tilting his head up to meet Shen Yuan’s eyes. They catch the morning sun, glinting like the green glass marbles he has seen Ning Yingying steal from the mediation pond.

“I would never leave without it,” Luo Binghe tells him and is finally given a small smile as Shen Yuan nudges back.

It has been three days since Shen Qingqiu left.

The Lord of Qing Jing Peak did so without any warning. He had been there one day and the next he was gone, only Ming Fan having been informed of where the man had disappeared off to.

Privately, Luo Binghe would have liked to celebrate the occasion. He had considered making use of the kitchen in the house at last, having gotten as far as finding a knife in need of sharpening and bowls that had dust clinging to them from never being used. It seemed that

Shen Qingqiu only ever used the teapot and a collection of cups from different sets. Because eating was for peasants, or something.

But the sudden disappearance had made Shen Yuan upset.

Three days, and Shen Yuan is still visibly sulking over it. Or perhaps it is because it has been three days since Luo Binghe was assigned this mission. Perhaps, he thinks, his best friend is more upset about Luo Binghe leaving as well. It is a selfish thought that he should not linger on, but it warms him as much as Zheng Yang's presence does.

"I wish I could come with Binghe," Shen Yuan says, "I still can't believe that Shizun banned me from leaving the mountain when he's not even here. It is so unfair!"

It is indeed.

But it is one of few decisions which Luo Binghe secretly agrees with.

"Yuan is still injured," he points out instead, which is true. Even with Mu Qingfang having increased the healing with his visits, Shen Yuan still has a limp and still needs a crutch when walking.

But he can stand on his own now. So Luo Binghe is the one holding the crutch as his best friend stubbornly hugs the bag close, eyes narrowing into green slits as he glares down at the cobblestones of the courtyard.

"Unfair," Shen Yuan repeats.

"... Yuan will be fine, right?" Luo Binghe asks. It has been nagging at him for days, and finally it bursts out before he can stop himself. "Going back to- to the house? Without this one's help? And- you know, with… sleep…"

"Who are you to fuss?" Shen Yuan scolds, and he leans against Binghe, bumping their heads together as he does. He is so lanky now, all limbs and little else. Luo Binghe lets him put his full weight against him and doesn't even stumble. Two years ago, Shen Yuan was the smallest disciple on the peak. "Binghe is the one going away to deal with- with a fox spirit! That is much more dangerous than going up some stairs. Apparently it ate a whole village's worth of chickens."

Shen Yuan's voice lilts upwards, as if he is trying to make a joke. But Luo Binghe knows how to read him; there is worry there, and he doesn't think *all* of it is for him only. But most of it is, and Binghe puts the crutch against the courtyard's stone wall.

"If Shixiong gives this lowly Shidi a hug before departure," he begins, "then this Shidi promises to return!"

"Shixiong this, shixiong that," Shen Yuan says, cheeks pink as he pushes himself upright, "we are practically the same age! And rank! If anything, Binghe will rise above me soon enough–"

“Yuan shouldn’t lie,” Luo Binghe says and spreads his arms wide as Ming Fan calls for a final headcount, “please? A hug for this lowly one?”

Shen Yuan falters; but then the bag is put down, and Luo Binghe burrows his face against Shen Yuan’s neck as they hug. He inhales and tries to memorize the scent of his best friend. He has been called a dog and a mongrel more than once for how good his nose is, but now it serves him well. There is the scent of a tingling warmth and the soap that all disciples use, bland and impersonal. But there is also just the scent of *Yuan.* Something indescribable but also a scent he can never, ever forget. It is the scent of home.

It’s probably creepy.

But Shen Yuan doesn’t mind. Binghe thinks he’s doing the same, with how tightly he hugs back. They are fourteen and they should not cling like they do as Ming Fan’s grating voice argues with Heng He’s placid tone. They are, as Shen Yuan likes to declare, mature for their age.

And yet they hug for as long as they can.

“Alright,” Shen Yuan says, voice trembling as he pushes away. He clears his throat, and Binghe’s own smile feels wobbly around the edges, “you- you *have* to be careful, Binghe. I’ll be very cross if you’re not.”

“Only if Yuan does the same,” he replies, and picks up the bag to throw over his shoulder and in the same motion gives back the crutch to Shen Yuan. As the others begin to unsheathe their swords, so does Luo Binghe. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Good.”

They stare at each other for a moment longer; the sun makes Shen Yuan’s hair shimmer blue, and Luo Binghe’s fingers itch with the urge to adjust Shen Yuan’s hairpin.

And then Heng He calls for them to take off, and Luo Binghe steps up onto Zheng Yang.

He keeps glancing behind himself as they fly. Shen Yuan remains where he stands, a quickly fading dot of green. And then they’re gone, out of sight, and Luo Binghe takes a deep breath and looks forward.

This is just another step towards becoming strong, he reminds himself as he falls into formation. This is for Shen Yuan.

Doesn’t help how he already misses him.

The house which belongs to the Lord of Qian Cao Peak is bigger than the one of Qing Jing's, made of dark wood and white stone and two stories tall. There is even a courtyard, the walls around it made up of brown bricks and white clay and thick enough that even if it was not some distance away from the healer buildings, Shen Yuan is sure it would mute all outside sounds.

However perhaps one should not call it a courtyard so much as a *garden.* For that is what it is; Shen Yuan steps through the gate and is surrounded by carefully planted greenery, split apart by white and gray stone paths that wind through them like abstract rivers. When he dares to take a peek, he sees little signs put down by each one and a list of what their uses are.

Some he recognizes from a different life; the red berries of schisandra, the bright yellow honeysuckle and what he finds to be the tiny leaves of ginseng. Others he knows for a fact is only a *Proud Immortal Demon Way* thing- the fanged mushrooms that gnaw at chicken bones, the bright pink rain lily that when poked starts to drip water.

Not that Shen Yuan pokes it; it says so, right there on its little sign.

"Shen-shizhi can poke it if he wishes," Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan pokes it before he fully registers the words. Immediately the pink flower begins to start dripping; but instead of just normal water, it glitters and shimmers like a whole rainbow is contained within each drop.

Mu Qingfang chuckles at the delighted smile on Shen Yuan's face.

"It is very popular with the younger disciples," he says, and helps Shen Yuan stand back up from where he was crouching, the crutch clattering against the stone path before it's tucked back under his arm, "now, it is still quite early. Has Shen-shizhi eaten yet?"

"No, Shishu," he replies and follows as Mu Qingfang begins to wind his way towards the house itself, "but this one isn't hungry… why is the house so much bigger than Shizun's?"

"The Peak Lord of Qian Cao is encouraged to teach groups of head disciples rather than to choose only one," the healer explains and holds the door open for Shen Yuan to wobble through, "and in the past, that meant the head disciples shared living quarters with the Peak Lord."

"And now?"

"Now, those rooms are used for experimentation or, in the case of my master, family. The head disciples live in the building we passed on our way here instead."

Shen Yuan hums and looks around.

The bamboo house was a relatively contained space and meticulously maintained for the exception of Shen Qingqiu's desk, which always seemed to have just one too many piles of scrolls to be considered proper.

Mu Qingfang's house is immediately much more open; there is not one big room that leads into a small kitchen and two bedrooms, but instead a wide space with furniture carefully placed out in such a way that makes it easy for him to navigate, crutches or not.

There is no work desk, but instead a round table which he assumes is for eating at, considering the lack of scrolls and ink. There is a fireplace, not in use due to how they are approaching late Spring and the warmer temperatures it brings. But by the fireplace there are *two* couches that look more fitting for a magazine on cozy interior design rather than ancient China. There is even a carpet, as thick as the one in the bamboo house but much bigger.

Also there's bookshelves.

Like, so many.

Dark and towering things packed full with books and scrolls alike, and he only barely remembers to get rid of his shoes before he *thud, thud* over as quickly as he is capable of, vaguely aware of passing the doors that must be leading into the experiment rooms that Mu Qingfang mentioned.

But also *books*.

"This master was planning to give Shen-shizhi a tour first," Mu Qingfang says, voice filled with amusement as Shen Yuan peeks at the titles, "to ensure that he knows where he will sleep, for example."

"Why are there so many sword books?" Shen Yuan asks, and then feels his cheeks grow warm as he registers Mu Qingfang's words, "ah- that is, sorry, Shishu. Yes, of course, this- that is. Um. Yes?"

Mu Qingfang smiles and shakes his head.

"If Shizhi wants to know about medicine, this one has a selection of books for new disciples. As for the books on swords, well. Wei-shixiong spends a lot of time here."

Shen Yuan blinks.

Oh.

Oh right.

Gay.

Shen Yuan was apparently not blushing before; now he most definitely is, face so hot he feels like he is about to boil and melt and slip between the cracks in the wooden floor.

“Oh,” he squeaks out, and Mu Qingfang raises a brow, still smiling that calm smile, “oh, right! Yes, Wei-shishu. Is- when I’m- when this one is here- he will…?”

“Perhaps,” Mu Qingfang says as if Shen Yuan made any sense at all, and he gestures towards a door that is conveniently close-by, “as Shizhi has crutches, this one thought perhaps this room would suit him best rather than the one upstairs? Would Shizhi like to see?”

Shen Yuan nods, throat too strangled to be trusted with something as complicated as *words*.

The room he steps into is simple, but very clearly one for guests, with cream colored walls and pale green curtains by the window. There is a canopy bed, much like the one back in the healing halls but lacking any medicine pouches. A table stands next to it and there is a low wardrobe to store clothes in opposite of the bed, as well as a bronze mirror resting on top of it. The walls have two paintings that- to Shen Yuan’s big surprise- are not of medicinal value. Instead one is a beautiful depiction of Cang Qiong Mountain itself, and the other one is two cranes dancing together in a misty morning.

“It’s nice,” he says, because it is, and thinks about the room back on Qing Jing Peak, cluttered with failed crafts, with a bed that they use for clothes instead of sleeping. Binghe has been gone for only a few hours.

It’s a rude and lukewarm response, but Mu Qingfang doesn’t seem to mind.

“There is a sigil on the table,” Mu Qingfang says and steps past Shen Yuan to show it, a circle that has been meticulously burnt into the wood itself alongside symbols he recognizes. There’s one for message, one for… qi, the base one you always include when you want the talisman to activate on command. There are a few more he does *not* recognize, however, and Shen Yuan leans in closer to inspect it.

“If Shizhi feels like he is close to qi deviation, or needs any other kind of help, he only has to touch the sigil and send a spark of qi into it. Of course, if Shizhi is already close to qi deviating, the sigil will activate on touch alone.”

Mu Qingfang gestures to the ceiling.

“This one’s bedroom is right above. The sigil will immediately alert this master, and help will be given swiftly.”

So it was a room for Peak lords that couldn’t be trusted alone, Shen Yuan thinks. And then–

“Shishu sleeps above me?” he blurts out, “with- with- with-”

Oh fuck, he’s a broken record. Shen Yuan feels like he is about to die and he gives up, words cutting off as he stares down at his sock clad feet and blushes as hard as before.

“There will be no sexual activity while Shen-shizhi is here,” Mu Qingfang says, casual as you please, and to his great humiliation, a squeak escapes Shen Yuan’s lips and he jerks his

head up to stare at the other man. Mu Qingfang's lips twitches upwards, "though perhaps this one will give Shizhi a lesson on such matters, if it is so difficult to speak of it."

Oh no.

Oh no!!!

Not the talk!?

"Please no," Shen Yuan whispers, and Mu Qingfang's one good eye shines with pure amusement and what may very possibly be mischief.

Oh fuck no.

"It is a natural thing of the human body, and Shen-shizhi *is* of the age where such things become important."

Shen Yuan drops his crutch in favor of hiding his face with both hands. The crutch clatters to the floor and he keens, wishing that Shen Qingqiu was there. That man, brothels or not, would never even deign to speak of such things and most definitely not to–!

The front door opens, loud and clear.

"A-Fang!" a cheerful voice calls, and through the open door, Shen Yuan catches a glimpse of black and red robes, "A-Fang, are you home yet? Is the tiny Shen here? Xiao-Shen! Your new favorite Shishu has arrived!"

Taking pity on him, Mu Qingfang picks up the crutch and presses it back into Shen Yuan's hands, who has been forced to drop them from his burning face.

"In here, Wei-ge," the healer calls, and oh holy shit and fuck, they use *endearments.* They didn't do that before! The fuck!!!!

Before Shen Yuan has any hopes of steeling himself, Wei Qingwei leans against the doorframe with one arm above his head. He smiles wide, dimples visible, and Shen Yuan nearly drops the crutch again.

"Hello," Wei Qingwei greets, dark eyes glittering as he cocks his head like a bird, "look at you! Already grown so much, even with one leg nearly gone! It's been, what, a month? Two?"

"T-this one greets Wei-shishu," Shen Yuan manages to mumble.

He doesn't know how the fuck those words even got out. He had forgotten how tall the man was, and just how high his tattoos went up his neck. His hair is curly just like Binghe's, falling carelessly over one shoulder.

"Be kind, Wei-ge," Mu Qingfang scolds, "Shen Yuan only just arrived."

“Oh? What is this one hearing? Mu-shidi has granted permission for his Wei-ge to use A-Fang?”

“It is our home,” Mu Qingfang says and gently but firmly pushes Wei Qingwei out of the doorway with one hand to his chest, “it would be quite ridiculous to not call ourselves such things here. And Shen-shizhi does not mind.”

Maybe he does though!

But no, it would be rude, wouldn’t it? It *is* their home. And Shen Yuan isn’t a homophobe! He let his sister read him way too much weird, gay porn to ever be called such a thing. He’s just- the PDA is a bit much, alright? Sure, they have only touched once but-

Wei Qingwei catches Mu Qingfang’s hand and gives it a kiss.

Shen Yuan drops his crutch.

“Did you not call him Yuan-shizhi before?” Wei Qingwei asks, and then, “this one did hear Xiao-Shen was quite clumsy, here you go,” and the crutch was promptly pressed back into his hands once more.

Shen Yuan hugs it close to his chest, as if it will offer any protection from the gay PDA happening right in front of him.

“Yuan-shizhi?” he dazedly asks.

“Only if Shen Yuan is comfortable with it,” Mu Qingfang promises, giving Wei Qingwei’s hand a squeeze before he tugs it free, gesturing for Shen Yuan to follow as Wei Qingwei steps to the side, “but this Shishu was hoping that we have grown close enough for such matters.”

Well, that makes sense. He *has* gotten a lot of medical help from the man, and he *is* about to spend a lot of nights in Mu Qingfang’s house.

“Could call him A-Yuan as well,” Wei Qingwei suggests.

Shen Yuan pauses.

“No, not A-Yuan,” Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan blinks and stares at his back, at the way the man so casually denied what should be a reasonable suggestion, “it would be Yuan-shizhi or Xiao-Yuan.”

Oh.

Shen Yuan slowly follows, the *thump, thump* loud but something he is used to by now. Wei Qingwei’s long legs quickly eat up the distance to the kitchen and Shen Yuan somehow finds himself sitting on one of the cozy couches, Mu Qingfang carefully moving his leg into the proper resting position. There is the sound of a teapot being filled and put down to be boiled,

and Shen Yuan balls up the sleeves of his uniform.

“Why wouldn’t Mu-shishu call this one A-Yuan?” he asks.

Mu Qingfang smiles, and Shen Yuan realizes that the two Peak Lords are wearing matching crowns. Copper, with tiny red stones of some kind nestled in between curling vines on Wei Qingwei’s, white ones for Mu Qingfang’s- though Mu Qingfang’s was more simple in comparison.

“Would Shizhi want this one to call him such?” the man asks.

Shen Yuan bites his lip and looks away.

“How does Shishu know that this one doesn’t- that this one…?”

“This master has learned that half of the healing process is to ensure that the patient is comfortable,” Mu Qingfang says as he sits down as well, hands cradled in his lap, “and perhaps Shizhi has noticed that some of this one’s sect siblings are… slow to trust.”

Freaky paranoids, Shen Yuan translates that to. Which is true; he tries to imagine giving Shen Qingqiu any kind of treatment and can only picture a hissing cat trying to claw someone’s eyes out. And Yue Qingyuan has proven eager to avoid uncomfortable things as well- he would probably use his sect leader powers for nefarious purposes such as avoiding well-intended advice.

Shen Yuan hasn’t really met the other Peak Lords. But he can’t imagine they are much better. That is a popular trope, after all. The more powerful you are, the more you hate getting help. It was part of Luo Binghe’s tragedy as a protagonist.

The more powerful Luo Binghe became, the more lonely and darker he became as well. He relied so much on his heavenly demon blood, on the fact that he didn’t need any help healing himself. Shen Yuan couldn’t remember all the names or numbers of his wives even when he had just read the story, much less *now,* years as a child in a world without rhe goddamn internet.

The point was–

Yeah, it made sense for Mu Qingfang to be observant enough to pick up on how Shen Yuan *still* hadn’t gotten rid of the annoying habit of twitching at hearing *A-Yuan.* It- it had become better! For sure! Most days he didn’t even mind it from Ning Yingying.

But then there were the bad days.

“Shizun said,” Shen Yuan says, switching topics and hoping Mu Qingfang will let him, “that if Mu-shishu doesn’t have the time to let this one sleep here, that Mu-shishu would find someone else to do so. Who… who would this one be handed over to?”

“Ah, that is a good question. There is a list, but perhaps Shen Yuan would like a say in it?”

“A list?” Shen Yuan echoes, finally daring to look at the other man, “in order of- of preference?”

“Of course. By my preference,” Mu Qingfang adds, “I am afraid to say that Shen-shixiong had quite a short one.”

The drop of formality is welcome. Shen Yuan relaxes and smiles when he nods, even as he feels a bit odd about that. Not about the list, but the mention of Shen Qingqiu. The bastard hadn’t even said *goodbye,* even though everything was so much better now when he knew the guy wouldn’t–

“Can I hear what Shizun’s list was?” he asks, cutting his own thoughts off. He can’t keep thinking about Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe, after all. That’s just begging for qi deviation! Ugh!

“In order, there is myself, followed by Zhangmen-shixiong and then lastly Tang Qingling.”

“Who’s Tang Qingling?”

“Xi Jiao’s Peak Lord,” Mu Qingfang explains, “the beast peak.”

Right. She was- she was a she, he thought. The other Lords hadn’t made that many appearances in the story, not before they were cut down or died in some other awful ways. Couldn’t have too many OP characters to intrude on the stallion protagonist.

“That’s it? Three people?” he asks.

“That is Shen-shixiong’s list, yes,” Mu Qingfang says, smiling, “mine is a bit longer, but shorter than one would think.”

He counted on his fingers.

“Myself, followed by Zhangmen-shixiong, Wan Qingshen- Lie Jiu Peak, talismans and artifact storage- Wei Qingwei,”

“Speaking of this one!” Wei Qingwei calls, causing Shen Yuan to jump, only to wince at the pain in his leg, “can I come and sit down? Or shall I pretend to be busy for a bit longer?”

Mu Qingfang sighs, looking quite long-suffering.

“Wei-ge is allowed to keep us company,” he replies, and Wei Qingwei is quick to show up with a tray of teacups and what looks like candied nuts.

“Excellent,” he says, “and I am deeply honored that my A-Fang has seen fit to name me number four.”

“This list can be adjusted at any time,” Mu Qingfang replies, and Shen Yuan accepts a cup of

tea and tries to focus on how warm it is rather than how close Wei Qingwei sits down next to Mu Qingfang, “now, let me continue. Zhang Qingyan of Zui Xian Peak and lastly, Shang Qinghua who I believe you have met.”

“That *is* a short list,” Shen Yuan acknowledges.

Which it is!

That’s just… Yue Qingyuan, followed by NPCs such as storage and brewery, and lastly Airplane.

“Why that order? And- and why not, um, the others…?”

“Qi-shijie’s peak only allows women,” Mu Qingfang explains and sips at his tea, “and while Tang-shimei and Yi-shimei would be a perfect fit normally, they do not fit Yuan-shizhi.”

Right; there had been quite a few qi explosions from Shen Yuan over the past two years, the more severe ones at the beginning before Mu Qingfang figured out that female healers tended to, uh, have less success than male ones.

It was so fucking embarrassing.

Shen Yuan’s blushes, mortified, and drinks his tea and hopes Wei Qingwei doesn’t say anything.

“Wang-shidi’s temper runs too hot and Liu-shixiong has also gone into the Ling Xi caves, though Bai Zhan Peak is generally a bad place for restful sleep. Shang-shixiong would be higher on the list, but his core is the weakest amongst us.”

“... but he’s still immortal?”

“Just barely!” Wei Qingwei says, “but he did get there in the end!”

Insanity. Airplane… *immortal.*

It sounded illegal.

“However, the order of the list can be adjusted,” Mu Qingfang says. “Are there any changes which Yuan-shizhi would like to make?”

Honestly, he hadn’t had much thought on that. But now- well.

“Could Shang-shishu be put higher?” he asks and tries to not fidget, “this one… enjoys his company.” Eugh. Ew! Gross! Agh!!! It’s a good thing that Airplane isn’t around to hear *that.* “Maybe after Shibo?”

“Very well,” Mu Qingfang says, and once that is over with, he shows which books Shen Yuan should read if he wishes to learn the very basics of the healing craft.

Maybe it will work out, even if Shen Yuan blushes every time he catches the two men doing something like holding hands.

Shen Yuan wakes up in a dark room.

There is no moonlight coming through the window; he lays for a moment, eyes wide and staring blindly up at the ceiling. His leg aches and cramps and when he reaches out, his hand only meets an empty spot next to him.

He knows where he is, Shen Yuan reminds himself, breath hitching. It is a struggle to sit up, his leg protesting in a way it hadn't before, not with Binghe- but he needs to sit up to light a candle, knows how to do it with the flick of his wrist now but he needs to see *where* to do it.

He was on Qian Cao Peak, Qian Cao Peak, Qian Cao Peak–

Sparks jump from his fingers, but he can't focus enough to make it intentional, proper, focused. Shen Yuan pats around for the lantern he had put on the bedside table, and his fingers brush against the sigil in the wood.

It thrums with a soft light and Shen Yuan snatches his hand away.

But it's too late; already he can hear shifting above. Shen Yuan cradles his hands to his chest and wishes his breathing wasn't so fucking *loud,* sounding strangled and weird.

He sits frozen and listens to the hurrying down the stairs, to the sound of someone walking in quick steps up to the door. The door opens, and Shen Yuan flinches before he stares at Mu Qingfang, holding a candle for light.

The Peak Lord is dressed in sleeping robes, his slate brown hair for once free of braids and crowns. His blind eye shines like a pearl in the warm candle light, his light brown one instead looking like it is made of gold.

He doesn't look angry.

"It is alright," Mu Qingfang says, and he walks closer, steps now calm, and Shen Yuan tries to breathe properly. It catches in his throat and his cheeks burn. Why the fuck can't he be calm *one night,* just one fucking night without Binghe-

The air ripples around his hands and the candle is put down on the table before warm, calloused hands catch his own. There is a hum of power, energy effortlessly pouring into him,

spreading out like a blanket muffling flames into smoke.

“Can Yuan-shizhi count to ten?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan shakes his head, because he can’t even talk, how is he supposed to *count!?* “Then breathe with me instead.”

The room fills with the sound of exaggerated breathing. Shen Yuan thinks his nails might be digging into the skin of Mu Qingfang’s hands, but if they are, the man isn’t protesting. Shen Yuan tries to mimic the breathing and tries to focus on the warmth being sent through his meridians.

It feels like an eternity before he can breathe without choking.

“There we go,” Mu Qingfang murmurs, and Shen Yuan hiccups and squeezes his eyes shut, “Xiao-Yuan did very well. Another deep inhale. Hold. Good, now exhale. There we go.”

Mu Qingfang squeezes his hands.

Shen Yuan tugs, and he is let go. His hands are still trembling, but they don’t feel itchy and sparking. Back to normal, he thinks, and is grateful he at least didn’t do something as pathetic as *crying.*

“Yuan-shizhi bit through his lip,” Mu Qingfang then says, and holds up a handkerchief, “there is blood. May this one clean it, or would Yuan-shizhi prefer to do it himself?”

Oh. So that’s why his mouth hurts.

“Self,” he mumbles, and presses the offered handkerchief to his bottom lip. Mu Qingfang stays where he is, sitting on the bed.

“Would you like some tea?” the man asks, and.

And that would be nice. But he doesn’t want to be alone, and he can’t- the fucking *crutch.* He can’t. So Shen Yuan shakes his head, hair a mess and getting in the way. Annoyed, he pushes it out of his face.

“No tea, or would it be alright if Wei Qingwei prepared some and brought it here?” Mu Qingfang then asks.

Shen Yuan grimaces.

“I w-woke him up too?”

“You are here to receive assistance, Xiao-Yuan. Needing it is not something to be ashamed of.”

“So I *did* wake him.”

“Perhaps. But would you like tea?”

Shen Yuan averts his eyes. Looks at the blood stained handkerchief in his hands and sighs.

“Yes please,” he says, and Mu Qingfang smiles before he calls out to his boyfriend.

Shen Yuan had hoped that this would go more smoothly. That maybe he could sleep like the twenty-year old of the past and not like the pathetic child he was now, that there would be no nightmares or dumb waking up to panic in an empty room.

But once again he overestimated himself.

Tea is given and it’s a different blend from what Shen Qingqiu often uses. Mu Qingfang doesn’t touch him and Wei Qingwei offers only a wink before he leaves again, perhaps to give space.

Shen Yuan eventually falls asleep again, though it takes a long time.

The bed is still too empty and the sleep is not restful.

He hopes Binghe is doing better than him.

“The bedhead is truly amazing,” Wei Qingwei says, “it is a fascinating peek into what Shen-shixiong must look like, before he is ready for the day.”

Shen Yuan slowly blinks at him.

His eyes feel like they might just fall out and his body feels just. So fucking heavy. But he gets to sit on the couch, covered in the thick blankets there, and he slowly lists forward until he can rest his cheek against the pillow he is hugging.

Wei Qingwei huffs a laugh.

“Don’t fall asleep before breakfast arrives, Xiao-Shen,” he says, tucking away the knife he had been sharpening. Where it ends up, Shen Yuan has no clue. He blinks and it’s gone, and he wonders just how many sharp things the Wan Jian Peak Lord is carrying. Wasn’t two swords enough? Overkill.

“Disciple Zhu will be here soon,” Mu Qingfang says, looking like *he* got a good night of sleep. Immortality is such an OP skill. The fuck. Shen Yuan can’t even practice inedia yet. “He is my youngest head disciple, little more than a year older than you,” Mu Qingfang adds as Shen Yuan slowly blinks at him instead, “and has the duty of reporting the status of certain

patients he is in charge of monitoring, as well as delivering the reports from the other head disciples."

Mu Qingfang pauses and gives Shen Yuan a critical once over.

"I was going to suggest he could fly you back to Qing Jing Peak today," he muses, "but perhaps you should stay for the day as well. Become more used to the house here for the future."

Shen Yuan should probably protest that. Shen Qingqu would throw such a fit if he found out. But, he decides, feeling a spark of annoyance, if the man wanted to ensure Shen Yuan would spend his time on Qing Jing, maybe he could have at least *told* Shen Yuan he was leaving.

Also he does *not* want to fall asleep in class. Ning Yingying would be such a pest, and Ming Fan even worse if he found out.

"M'kay," Shen Yuan says and yawns.

"He really is cute," Wei Qingwei says, and laughs when Shen Yuan aims a sleepy glare his way. He's too tired to care about how Mu Qingfang is brushing the man's hair. He can be embarrassed by that later.

There is a knock on the door.

"Enter," Mu Qingfang calls, and a boy steps inside, carrying a large tray heavy with their breakfast.

He is tall, Shen Yuan notes as the boy comes closer. Tall, with messy copper brown hair and the kind of brown eyes that almost look deep red in certain lights. The hair is tied back into a short tail, but plenty is escaping it and getting in the way even as the boy tries to discreetly blow it out of the way. He has a scar on his chin, long enough it nearly touches the corner of his mouth.

Shen Yuan is suddenly very aware of the fact he's sitting in sleep robes with the messiest bedhead of all time. Slowly he pulls one blanket over his head, hoping against hope that the boy, who is sneaking glances at him, didn't see.

"This one greets Shifu and Wei-Shibo," the teenager says and offers a careful bow as he puts down the tray on the table.

"Good morning, Zhu Kang," Mu Qingfang warmly replies, "and our guest is Shen Yuan of Qing Jing Peak. He is staying here for today, but in the future you will be helping him back and forth to Qing Jing Peak each morning and evening," Mu Qingfang says, and Zhu Kang seems to notice the crutch and how awkwardly Shen Yuan is sitting, leg held straight.

Still, the boy nods and offers a polite bow of his head.

"This one greets Shen-shidi," he says, "and is delighted to be of future help."

Oh, good. Shen Yuan had a brief but intense fear the older boy would have called him Shixiong based on Peak rank alone, despite being so noticeably taller and older than himself. Or worse, ask *why* Shen Yuan is fucked up enough to not only stay at Mu Qingfang's house but also to need to stay nights only.

Still, he tugs down the blanket tighter and manages a smile that feels very awkward.

"This one greets Zhu-shixiong," he returns, and Zhu Kang beams a smile wide enough to make his eyes shaped like crescent moons.

Well, at least he seems nice.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *happy*
SQQ: These good vibes are giving me hives. I'm out of here.
SY: the fuck. Not even a goodbye??? A wave??? NO WARNING????????
SQQ, in Ling Xi Caves: ah, much better. I can feel the anger from Qing Jing Peak already- wait no this is too close.
LQG:

Also I began to play "Slay the Princess" and goodness me. *fans self* She sure slays!
Also I just drank a gingerbread flavored soda. I'm not sure how to feel about it. It's not bad??
Once again THANK YOU for the amazing comments!!! I'm so sorry I've been so slow to reply lately ;A; I WILL DO IT. At one point! Yes!!! Because I love talking with you guys!!!! (and is anyone else reading Tarnished Gold by Prim_the_amazing? the suspense in the latest chapter!!!)

Anyway!!!! Fanart :D

Quest-draws made this hilarious lil vine version from chapter 21! Pls I love it

Creafanee drew very cute sketches. Look at that blushing Shen Yuan! Oh my heart ;A;

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It has been two days.

Shen Yuan has not been on Qing Jing Peak for *two days,* a fact that Ming Fan has been far too busy to notice until now. There have simply been so many things to do, so many duties to uphold, now that Shizun has gone into the Ling Xi caves. This is the time for Ming Fan to prove to everyone that he *can* handle the duties of a Peak Lord!

However… two days.

What should have been nightly visits has instead become something very suspicious indeed. Now, Ming Fan does not want to believe the worst of his Shizun's sect siblings. They are all powerful, noble and trustworthy individuals who help make the entire sect stronger.

Disciple poaching is a practice generally used by lesser sects. Cang Qiong Mountain has never been forced to stoop to such lows- anyone who wishes to join does so out of their own will, not out of shady manipulation or bribes!

However, Ming Fan can't deny that there might be some *internal* poaching. At times, an An Ding disciple shows great promise in the four arts and is *elevated* to a higher standard if Shizun deems it so, though it is quite rare and a privilege indeed. As the second peak of Cang Qiong Mountain, one can hardly use the word *poaching* for such an honor.

But poaching or not, of course none would dare to do such a thing to Qing Jing Peak; their Shizun may be strict, but they all know he only upholds others to the strict standards he set to himself! The work is difficult, the task of learning not only the four arts but also the required strategy and minimum knowledge required to earn the title of a Qing Jing disciple–

But Shizun is no longer on the Peak.

And clearly, Shizun's sect siblings have taken the opportunity to try and… steal. Starting with Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan.

Ming Fan frowns as he flies through the air, hands tucked behind his back and robes fluttering in the wind as he refuses to look at those he passes by. The green ribbon in his hair was a late addition for the day, but perhaps the sight of it will remind the brat of where his true loyalties should lie.

Qian Cao Peak is, of course, a very good peak! An important part of Cang Qiong Mountain!

But Shen Yuan? Of all the disciples? Is it not enough that the brat already spends his time there as a patient more than any other? Why he would even *want* to remain, Ming Fan does not know. The boy certainly always spent far too much time whining about being there before, and considering how disgustingly attached he and Luo Binghe are most of the time-

Unless Shen Yuan is kept there against his will.

Ming Fan halts midair and scowls at the Wan Jian disciple that swears at him for it- honestly, so crude, just fly around!- before he turns this new challenge over in his mind.

Would Mu Qingfang do such a shameless thing? Shen Yuan would be of no use! Always sick, always hurt, always whining! His qi may be of some notice, perhaps, as is proper for a son of Shen Qingqiu, but the rest? He has mastered his writing and yet always spills ink everywhere! Ming Fan has seen him trip on air! Surely Mu Qingfang would not forcibly keep such a nuisance?

Unless it is a way to get back at Shizun.

He lands on Qian Cao Peak and sheathes Yin Tian. Ming Fan smoothes out his robes, ensures that his hair is neat once more as is suitable for the head disciple of Qing Jing Peak, and then he makes his way towards Mu Qingfang's house and does his best to not let his new suspicion show on his face as he passes by those of Qian Cao Peak.

Their robes are not as uniform as other peaks; something about each color being dedicated to a specific field, so that one can find the proper healer faster. Ming Fan understands the logic behind it, but it still makes Qian Cao Peak feel so very disorganized. Still he makes his way through hurrying cultivators, needing only to ask for directions once.

After nearly getting his robes chewed on by some type of mushroom, Ming Fan makes his way through the garden and all the way to the door and knocks. He steels himself as he listens to someone walking to answer, resisting the urge to grasp at Yin Tian. Even if they *are* forcibly keeping Shen Yuan, Ming Fan knows he can't go charging in like some lunatic.

Mu Qingfang opens the door with a placid smile.

"Ah, Ming-shizhi," Mu Qingfang greets, "a rare sight."

Ming Fan stands straight.

"This humble one is here to retrieve disciple Shen," he says, and keeps his hands behind his back and tries to peer around Mu Qingfang without actually moving. Because that would be rude, and Ming Fan is not *rude.*

"Xiao-Shen is currently being given a sorely needed lesson," Wei Qingwei's voice calls out, startling Ming Fan.

He is aware of the relationship between his martial uncles; unmarried lovers since before Ming Fan joined the sect, their romantic tale often being shared between disciples.

But Ming Fan did not realize he would have to free Shen Yuan from *two* peak lords, did not realize that Wei Qingwei would spend his time at Qian Cao Peak even this early in the day. The task has in one sentence become far more challenging, and Ming Fan's fingers curl behind his back.

The brat may be annoying, but surely not even he should have to suffer through this ominous sounding 'lesson'?

Except then there is the sound of very quick, clumsy movement and a crutch tapping against the floor and Mu Qingfang shifts to the side and reveals Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan's face is bright red, as if he is feverish. His eyes are wide and horrified, his hair a mess and Ming Fan has not seen him this distraught since- well, the bloodied attack at the mission doesn't count, but-

"Save me," Shen Yuan gasps.

"This one is pleased to see that disciple Shen has such a dedicated shixiong," Mu Qingfang says.

Ming Fan freezes; he realizes he has somehow moved so that he is between Peak Lord and brat, one hand on Yin Tian's pommel.

How rude.

"This one apologizes to Shishu," he says, heart beating as he forces his hand away from his sword, instead putting it onto Shen Yuan's shoulder, "disciple Shen has missed two days worth of lessons and must quickly return to Qing Jing Peak. This one will of course escort disciple Shen back to Shishu's home tonight."

"It is quite alright," Mu Qingfang says and Ming Fan does not *glare* . That would be rude. But he has the strangest urge to do it, such a disrespectful act. He has already *been* disrespectful and he should not continue to be so. "Head disciple Zhu has agreed to escorting disciple Shen between our Peaks until disciple Shen is capable of doing so himself."

Ming Fan does *not* remember a head disciple by the name of *Zhu.*

"This one thanks Shishu," he says, and slowly unsheathes Yin Tian, because there is no good way to ask *Is Shishu lying?* Of the most respected healer in the lands and a man who Ming Fan does, in fact, respect very much. It is time for a very strategic retreat. "And we must now say goodbye, so that disciple Shen does not miss more of our peak's teachings."

"Of course. We will meet again," Mu Qingfang says.

By the time Ming Fan is in the air, letting the brat hug him from behind, he exhales the breath he had been holding.

“Why,” he says, “did Shidi not return? Two days have passed, and not a single hair has been seen!” He feels Shen Yuan squeeze his waist as he mutters something against Ming Fan’s back, and so Ming Fan gives his arm a pinch in retaliation.

“Hey!” the brat protests.

“Answer your Dashixiong,” he snaps back, because he is, in fact, *the* shixiong! Shen Yuan should show some respect, son of Shen Qingqiu or not! “Shidi was meant to come back the very next day! Xiao-Shimei missed you!”

“Mu-shishu said this one could stay! For a bit longer, anyway! And there were books on qi deviation that this one simply had to read, like, did Ming-shixiong know that one can actually *kill* someone by pushing qi into their meridians the wrong way during a qi deviation? Even if it’s a minor deviation that *wasn’t* dangerous?”

“Obviously this one knew that! That is why Shidi is allowed to spend the night at Mu-shishu’s home,” Ming Fan scoffs, and then puts his hands on Shen Yuan’s arms as they dive downwards, just to make sure the brat doesn’t accidentally let go. There is *some* cultivator strength in those thin arms, but not enough to trust a clumsy idiot to cling properly.

“Well, this one believes it’s important for specifically *this one* to know such things!”

“Whatever. Did they do something? Did they imply you would be better off there? Did they try to bribe you with these books?” Ming Fan asks, and sneers at the Wan Jian disciple who was rude before, who in turn makes a most rude hand gesture. Honestly, do they not teach manners on the other peaks? And what are the chances of flying past that guy *again?* Ugh.

“No?” Shen Yuan says, unsure.

“Shizun would *not* like it if Shidi switched peaks,” Ming Fan warns as they land on Qing Jing, low enough that Shen Yuan can step off the sword without much trouble. Ming Fan smooths out his uniform once more, the brat having wrinkled it with how tightly he clung. As if Ming Fan would let him fall! “So keep that in mind! And who is the head disciple named Zhu? This one never met them.”

“Mu-shishu said he is their newest head disciple,” Shen Yuan says, adjusting the grip on his crutch. He looks like a stiff wind could push him over. Ming Fan frowns. “He seems nice,” Shen Yuan adds. And then the boy pauses.

“Has Dashixiong heard anything from Shizun?” the brat asks.

“No,” Ming Fan replies, and puts his hands on his hips, “Shizun is in seclusion, which means there won’t be any messages from Shizun until he is finished. Why? Did Shen-shidi wish to ask something? Shidi *does* know that this one is in charge at the moment, correct?”

Shen Yuan gives him a very rude look; wrinkling his nose and everything.

“This one was just wondering,” Shen Yuan says, “this one just… heard that Liu-shishu is in

the caves as well."

Ah.

"Well, that is surely fine," Ming Fan says, even though he has attended more than enough meetings to see how, um. Well. Liu Qingge is *very* talented and courageous and fitting for Bai Zhan Peak. Ming Fan does not know if, despite this, the Ling Xi caves will remain unscathed from having both Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge within it. "Though that probably means we need to prepare for future raids."

Shen Yuan blinks.

"Raids?" he asks, and tilts his head.

"Whenever Liu-shishu leaves Bai Zhan, the disciples over there go on raids," Ming Fan explains, and ugh, Shen Yuan's hair is so *messy* from the flight. But Ming Fan won't touch it, because Shen Yuan is weird about his hair.

Ming Fan doesn't like thinking about *why* he is weird about it.

"They like to attempt to ambush An Ding carts or make direct assaults on Qing Jing. The other Peaks as well, sure, it is only that they realized we are the most worthy ones, so they attack us the most."

"Isn't it because Liu-shishu and Shizun don't get along?" Shen Yuan asks, not at all as innocently as he thinks he is.

Ming Fan *hmpfs*.

"It is time for Shidi to attend his lessons," he says, "stop dawdling!"

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. *Brat.*

Ming Fan keeps an eye on him to make sure the idiot doesn't trip and fall on the way, though at least it's not far for the brat to walk. Ming Fan made sure to land close to the buildings he knew that Shen Yuan was supposed to attend. Because Ning Yingying was meant to be there too, of course. No other reason.

Only once Shen Yuan has entered does Ming Fan turn away.

There is so much to do.

Getting to the tree was a challenge that Shen Yuan dreads to repeat.

But there he is, sinking down into the grass and nestles in between the large roots. Shen Yuan idly plucks at the grass and just… sits, for a moment.

His leg aches from the long trek, but it's not too bad. Not when he can see all of Qing Jing Peak from his spot. Everything has become so very green now, all traces of winter having melted away. Green bamboo, green grass, green trees and green uniforms. When he tilts his head back to gaze at the canopy above, he has to spend a moment to simply admire how vibrant it is. Like someone carved emeralds into leaves.

Shen Yuan still doesn't know what kind of tree it is. Binghe had suggested it could be a hybrid of some kind, or perhaps something brand new created from all the energy which soaked each of Cang Qiong Mountain's peaks.

He pushes the crutch to the side and shuffles to get more comfortable. His fingers are sore from plucking strings, and his hands still have lingering ink stains, looking almost like smeared bruises.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* Shen Qingqiu stayed within the Ling Xi caves for a year, though Liu Qingge died pretty early and his body was taken care of quickly, and then the rumors of what had actually happened began to travel in between peaks. Luo Binghe in the story had refused to believe that their Shizun could do such a thing.

But Shen Yuan isn't sure *how* early Liu Qingge died. Has it passed already? Is it yet to come? Every time he tries to ask around without giving too much away, all he gets are stupid smiles telling him it's just a year, and that a year is not such a long time.

Shen Yuan scrapes a nail against tree bark. He has been back on Qing Jing Peak for hours, Ning Yingying cheerfully bright and in the way, Ming Fan sometimes swooping in to nag at him before hurrying off to deal with- something.

He really wasn't lying when he said he stayed at Qian Cao Peak because of the books, though the lesson on- uh- bird and bees was, um. Yeah. Fuck that shit. Ming Fan arrived at the *perfect* moment.

But now when he's back on Qing Jing Peak…

Binghe isn't there.

He knew that, obviously. But he really *feels* it now. Shen Yuan isn't meant to sit by their tree alone! He's supposed to sit and wait for Binghe to arrive with food, or to look up and see Binghe sitting among the branches. But Binghe is still away on his mission, and here Shen Yuan sits. Alone.

He wrinkles his nose.

The sun is already setting, too. He should be making his way down to the rainbow bridge and wait for Zhu Kang, or Ming Fan or whoever is picking him up. Because despite having a cool, badass sword, he can't fucking fly on it.

"Isn't the protagonist meant to finish jobs early?" he mutters, watching the cultivators of Cang Qiong Mountain fly through the air. Dark spots against the sunset, like birds coming in for the nightly roost. "A week at most- so then shouldn't Binghe be home tomorrow? Can't the golden halo activate early?"

Though he probably shouldn't say that. Shen Yuan *should* try and get Shang Qinghua to be his, ugh, babysitter. So that they can talk shit out, figure out the System and the Abyss and all that bullshit. He can't do that with Binghe around, not with how weird his friend is about Airplane.

But at least Binghe would be there to be weird about it.

He plucks long grass blades and begins to braid them. Maybe Zhu Kang will find him at the tree. It's not a secret spot, after all. Ning Yingying would tell him about it if asked.

Shen Yuan can sit for a bit longer.

Shen Yuan has managed to weave a basket by the time Zhu Kang arrives.

It's not a very good basket. It's actually a pretty shitty one, grass blades poking out at odd angles, the entire design wonky and riddled with holes. Shen Yuan lets it fall to the ground without remorse, tilting his head up to peer at the new arrival.

"Shen-shidi," Zhu Kang greets, smiling that bright smile again, hair looking much more red with the sunset behind him. Shen Yuan makes an attempt at a bow from his awkward leaning position.

"This one greets Zhu-shixiong," he replies, and then sheepishly adds, "this one needs help getting up. Sorry." He had kind of begun to sprawl at some point, and now he doesn't know how to get up without fucking up his leg again.

The taller boy looks like he is fighting to avoid laughing. His lips tremble with it, eyes bright, and the clear attempt at a solemn nod falls short.

"This one understands," he says and gets closer, crouching between the roots of the trees, "may this one touch Shidi?"

“That would be helpful,” Shen Yuan agrees.

Zhu Kang’s hands are big; with the brown-red eyes and the big smile and the gentle, careful grabbing, it all gives Shen Yuan the impression of a teenage dog. Big paws and lanky limbs.

After some careful nudging and grabbing and maneuvering, Shen Yuan stands once more. He groans and stretches, then *squeaks* when he nearly falls over, his injured leg all pins and needles. Zhu Kang steadies him with a hand at his elbow, before he hands over Shen Yuan’s crutch.

“Careful,” Zhu Kang says, “is Shidi alright? Any pain, dizziness?”

Oh, he truly *is* a disciple of Qian Cao Peak.

“Leg is a bit numb,” Shen Yuan admits, leaning a bit too heavily on his crutch, “but there’s nothing else, this one thinks.”

“Alright. Shidi must speak up if that changes,” Zhu Kang says, and pulls out his sword. It’s a surprisingly wide blade, not quite as massive as Yue Qingyuan’s, but similar enough that Shen Yuan can’t help but peer at it. The blade itself looks very normal, all sleek and shiny steel. There’s a tassel with a bird-shaped jade hanging from it.

Zhu Kang puts one foot on the sword and keeps it there as he helps Shen Yuan climb onto it. It’s easier to stand on than Ming Fan’s blade, or anyone so far, actually. It’s almost as if it was *made* to have two people on it.

“There we go. Is Shidi secure?” Zhu Kang asks, one arm looping around Shen Yuan, a steady pressure. It feels awkward- they don’t know each other, after all. But Shen Yuan sighs and nods, because it’s not like he would survive flying without *some* support.

“This one is fine,” he assures, holding the crutch awkwardly, not exactly sure how to best hold it without being in the way.

They rise and simply… fly off of the hill that the tree is on, and Shen Yuan wiggles his fingers in goodbye at it, hoping Zhu Kang doesn’t notice.

The hill was high enough that even just flying straight forward quickly gives them some height from the ground and all the stairs looping and weaving over Qing Jing Peak. But soon Zhu Kang angles more upwards, the wind fluttering around them. Shen Yuan pretends he’s not a cardboard cutout in how stiffly he holds himself. Nope. Totally cool and relaxed, for sure!

“Does Zhu-shixiong like birds?” he blurts out.

“They’re alright,” Zhu Kang says, “but there’s so many birds, so Shidi would have to be more specific.”

“Um- well, this one just noticed the tassel…”

“Ah!” Zhu Kang laughs, a short *hehehe* kind of laugh that makes Shen Yuan bite his own lip to avoid laughing as well, “that’s a gift! This one’s Jiejie gifted it, so that we would match.”

That’s *cute.* The fuck? Shen Yuan wants to match with someone too- maybe that’s something he could fix? He and Binghe could match, surely there’s a way to get some sword tassels without leaving the sect?

“Is Shixiong’s sister a cultivator too?” he asks.

“Zhu-jie is part of Bai Zhan Peak,” Zhu Kang admits, and Shen Yuan’s mental image of a gentle, older sister figure shatters just like that. “Her name is Zhu Zhu, before Shidi wonders.”

“She’s from Bai Zhan?” Shen Yuan instead says, and then feels his face going red from how rude he just was. “Sorry! This one apologizes, just, um.”

Zhu Kang laughs again.

“It is fine, this one understands,” the taller boy reassures, his arm tightening around Shen Yuan as they dip to avoid a group of masters.

Shen Yuan wonders if there’s a term for that, like murder of crows or a mischief of magpies. Flight of masters? No, too simple.

“Jiejie is very strong and takes after this one’s father. However,” and there’s plenty of mirth in Zhu Kang’s voice, even with the wind forcing them to raise their voices to be heard, “Jiejie did break as many bones as she broke vases growing up. This one simply fell into this path as a result.”

“And Shixiong is happy?” Shen Yuan wonders.

“Of course,” Zhu Kang replies, “Shifu is the most talented healer in the land and has honored this one greatly by making him a head disciple.”

“But you’re-” *my taxi,* except taxis don't exist in this world. “-stuck with this, now. Would Shixiong not rather spend time at Qian Cao than to fly this one around?”

“It is only a short flight, twice a day,” Zhu Kang says, “and Shidi is a patient in need of care. Care comes in many shapes and forms; this one is only grateful to be trusted with a patient’s health.” Zhu Kang pauses before continuing, “however, if Shidi *does* have other problems, this one would be happy to find a way to treat them.”

Zhu Kang sounds hopeful, as if maybe Shen Yuan will turn out to be patient zero for some kind of new disease that Zhu Kang, as a doctor, will of course cure. But also kind of like a dog hoping to be given some scraps from the dining table, all big eyes and wagging tail.

“This one’s leg isn’t even numb anymore,” Shen Yuan says, and can’t help but giggle as Zhu

Kang sighs in an exaggerated way, “this one apologizes.”

“It is fine,” Zhu Kang says, smiling when Shen Yuan peeks a glance at him, “Shifu always says one should not offer unneeded services, anyway, if one wishes to avoid being worked to an early death.”

Wow, morbid.

“This one will land by Shifu’s house, so that Shidi doesn’t need to walk more than he already has. But this one will return with food- does Shidi have any wishes?”

The food he had eaten these past days at Qian Cao had been… bland. But maybe that was just what being spoiled by the protagonist did. Still, Shen Yuan flexes his fingers, cold from the evening wind, and gives a small nod as they land.

“Maybe… if there’s something with chicken?” he asks, accepting a hand to help him down from the sword, “if it’s not too much of a bother.”

Zhu Kang smiles, just as wide as when they first met.

“This one does believe there is chicken noodle soup available today,” Zhu Kang says, and oh, surely one can’t fuck up chicken noodle soup? Shen Yuan perks up, and the taller boy laughs again and nods. “Chicken soup shall be delivered soon,” he promises and-

Huh. Zhu Kang had apparently gently led him up to the door, without Shen Yuan even noticing. Okay, that *is* some good bedside manners. Or patient handling. Whatever one could call it.

“This one thanks Zhu-shixiong,” he says and manages an awkward bow.

“It is this one’s pleasure,” Zhu Kang replies, “does Shidi need help to the couch? Shidi seems flushed.”

“The wind,” Shen Yuan says and rubs at a warm cheek, cold and warm all at once from their journey, “Shixiong need not worry.”

“Alright,” and Zhu Kang’s smile softened as he sheathed his sword once more, the scabbard hanging from his back rather than his hip, “this one will return soon. Shifu should be inside.”

Shen Yuan watches him go, then hums and makes his way inside, stomach already grumbling as he enters.

“Welcome back, Yuan-shizhi,” Mu Qingfang greets.

And yeah, it’s no Binghe’s warm welcome or even Shen Qingqiu’s aloof acknowledgement. But Mu Qingfang’s golden eye is soft, his smile welcoming and the pile of books Shen Yuan had hoarded is still waiting by the couch.

“This one greets Shishu,” he replies, and when Mu Qingfang coaxes him into talking about his day, Shen Yuan is happy to do so.

In the dreadfully early morning hours of Qian Cao Peak, Shen Yuan sits on a bench in the garden and makes an awful attempt at waking up.

He knows he is only barely succeeding at anything close to it- he has his uniform on, but he’s fairly certain his hairpin is pointing downwards, and the uniform itself doesn’t feel like it sits right on him. Also he might be missing a sock.

But Mu Qingfang wouldn’t let him sleep past the very first hint of light; apparently the Peak Lord had many things to do that morning, and Wei Qingwei hadn’t returned to the house the previous evening. And they had sadly learned that Shen Yuan was… bad. At getting out of bed. By himself.

In his defense, he hadn’t had a single sleep-in morning until he arrived at the sect! He had *years* to make up for! Being an *indentured servant* for years didn’t lead to many good, sleepy mornings.

But here he sits, forced to stay awake, Mu Qingfang having led him to the bench with a cup of tea, and then left him there. Shen Yuan stares sleepily at the morning dew clinging to all the plants around him, cradling his still warm tea in his hands.

Luo Binghe has been gone for five days now.

But that is not something he can think too hard about; his brain is already sluggish, to the point that when he sees Shang Qinghua slowly peeking into the garden, Shen Yuan assumes he’s hallucinating.

He watches as Airplane tip-taps inside like the worst thief trying to be sneaky *ever*. He’s dressed in the brown and white of An Ding Peak, boots more practical and sturdy than anything found on Qing Jing. Shen Yuan sleepily watches as the man sneaks over to a bush riddled with bright blue flowers and surrounded by talismans. Ice… something… bush.

“He’s here again?” Zhu Kang whispers, and Shen Yuan startles so badly his tea spills all over.

“How did you-?” he begins to ask, but then Zhu Kang shushes him, and Shen Yuan settles on blinking rapidly at him even as the other boy begins to carefully clean away the spilled tea.

“Shifu says to let Shang-shibo ‘borrow’ herbs as often as he wishes,” Zhu Kang whispers, gently taking the cup away from Shen Yuan and puts it aside on a nearby outdoor table, “but

this one really does not understand why he can't just seek *actual* help…"

Oh.

Shen Yuan's eyes widens and he looks back at Shang Qinghua once more, finally realizing that the guy is *real* and *there* and somehow completely missing that there are two teenagers in the garden with him.

And this is the immortal Shang Qinghua??? A Peak Lord??? Missing something so obvious!? The fuck, Airplane!

But the longer he looks, the more… off, Shang Qinghua seems. He moves weirdly, and he only uses one hand when he plucks flowers from the bush. Shen Yuan shakes away the drowsiness.

"Shouldn't we tell him we're here?" he whispers to Zhu Kang.

Zhu Kang looks conflicted; but before he can do something like explain why they can't, Shang Qinghua turns around, sees them and jumps so high it might just be powered by qi.

"Woah! Hello, little disciples," Shang Qinghua says, voice too loud and shrill, "did *not* see you there! Don't mind this master, just here to- wait! Why are *you* here?" Shang Qinghua asks as he finally realizes who Shen Yuan is.

"Hello, Hua-shishu," Shen Yuan replies, which earns him a twitch.

"Shidi knows Shibo?" Zhu Kang asks, glancing between the two.

"Oh, yes, this one is his favorite uncle," Shang Qinghua rambles, walking closer at an odd angle, as if trying to hide his arm, "you are very early! Is there an emergency, a medical emergency? Where, haha, where *is* Mu-shidi anyway?"

Oh no.

Shen Yuan hopes he's not as bad at lying and distracting as Airplane is. It's like watching someone try and light a match and ending up in a bonfire. Fascinating and horrifying, unable to look away.

"Shifu is handling an emergency," Zhu Kang politely explains, sneaking glances at the hidden arm of Shang Qinghua, "... may this one be of help? This one saw that Shibo was plucking the Ice Growing Petals?"

"Ice growing petals? What's that?" Shen Yuan asks.

"Surprised *you* don't know," Airplane mutters and Shen Yuan would kick him if the man stood just a little closer.

"Ice Growing Petals can be used for numerous things, but is mostly used to heal frostburn,"

Zhu Kang explains, “especially the fresh petals- they are very large, see? And so if one were to put them onto the affected area and then circulate qi, it will easily heal the most severe frostburn if given enough qi-”

Zhu Kang continues as if reading directly from a book. But Shen Yuan meets Airplane’s wide eyes and thinks *oh.*

“Perhaps,” Shen Yuan says as Zhu Kang pauses in his explanation, “perhaps this one could spend time with Hua-shishu today? It has been a long time, and this one has some questions that only Hua-shishu can answer.”

“Oh, truly?” Zhu Kang asks, and Shen Yuan sees how the other boy glances at the clearly injured (frostbitten? Did Mobei-Jun…?) arm of Shang Qinghua who is still trying very hard to stand in such a way that it remains out of sight, “this one isn’t certain, that is… Shidi needs help with flying and…” Zhu Kang trails off, stuck in between pointing out the elephant in the room or, well, not.

“Haha! This master doesn’t mind!” Shang Qinghua says once the silence drags on for too long, clearly minding, “but perhaps you…?”

“This one is Zhu Kang, Shibo.”

“Disciple Zhu can drop off disciple Shen a little… later? This one really cannot spare the time to, um, fly him right now, but perhaps in an hour! Yes! Sounds good? Amazing, see you later, Cu- that is, disciple Shen! Bye!”

And–

Shang Qinghua is gone.

It happened so quickly, Shen Yuan half-wonders why there isn’t some cartoonish dust cloud left behind. They both stare at the spot he had just stood on. There is no sign of him ever having been there.

“Perhaps Shibo broke his arm again,” Zhu Kan finally says, his voice concerned, “the petals can be used to sooth such pain as well.”

Frostbite or broken arm.

Shen Yuan has the dreadful thought it might just be both.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *looking like the sleepiest, most fragile and prettiest boy in the world*
ZK: I do not know what a burrito is nor why I wish to wrap Shen-shidi like one. But I do have a mighty urge.
LBH: why do I taste vinegar???

SQH, meanwhile, is not beating the Sus Allegations.

Also heads up!!! I'll have to officially begin to update every second week instead of every week. I hope to one day return to once a week schedule, but right now I just... can't. There's so much to do IRL at the moment and I do NOT want to rush each chapter. It's already hard to remember if it's late Spring in the current timeline or not. <_<
But yes! I'll update every second Monday from now on! I hope you understand.

Thanks as always for reading!

Anqelbean drew this bittersweet picture of LBH hugging SY goodbye in chapter 22 <3

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ice Growing Petals is a plant that Shang Qinghua wrote about maybe once in all of *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* It just hadn't been a big thing- frostbite was *not* sexy, after all.

But the moment he got in contact with Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua had researched everything that could prevent injuries from cold damage, because Mobei-Jun always looked one word away from freezing his dick off. And as the one who wrote him, Shang Qinghua knew that paranoia was well-justified *and intense.*

For once in his miserable existence, he had been in luck. Ice Growing Petals happened to be super easy to get once he cozied up to the one sane shidi in the entire sect, Mu Bohai.

When they all became Peak Lords, the newly dubbed Mu Qingfang continued to be the best sect brother, because he was a good dude and always pretended he didn't see shit whenever Shang Qinghua wormed his way into the garden to snatch some.

But even though Shang Qinghua has used the flower so very many times throughout these years, he can never grow used to the feeling. Because where he is injured, it's already numb and gross. Putting the petals on top of it makes him feel a *different* numb, somehow, and then circulating qi–

It fucking sucks! It's a thousand needles and static, blood rushing in a way that makes the area swing weirdly between hot and cold, numb and too much, and also the petals are such a bright blue it's impossible to pretend they're not there. Sometimes, with the qi, they glow through cloth!

And this time there's a broken arm as well.

Mobei-Jun is a fucking asshole.

Shang Qinghua groans and faceplants his desk. The *thud* from forehead connecting with wood is a distant pain that he's just going to ignore, his arm feeling like shit as he cradles it carefully close to him. He would like to wallow in his misery, but there's no one to whine to about the injustice done to him, the *god of this fucking world.*

"Airplane?"

Shang Qinghua shifts so he has his chin pressed to his desk, but remains hunched over. In the entrance to his house, Cucumber-bro stands with his crutch. He looks awkward, which is a rarity. Normally the lil' dude is fully channeling his teenage angst into being a petty bitch while also refusing to admit he's a kid. But there he is. All awkwardly.

He's going to be disgustingly tall once he finishes growing, Shang Qinghua bitterly thinks.

"Didn't hear you," Shang Qinghua says and sits up with a grimace, "what up? Heard you almost lost a leg, but here you are! Only needing one crutch, huh? Lucky you."

He hadn't seen the injury himself; trying to visit Cucumber-bro with Shen Qingqiu around was a death sentence he had absolutely no interest in.

But he had made sure to seek out any information he could find and, uh, yeah. Somehow Cucumber-bro truly had nearly lost a whole damn leg on his *first mission.* He had been uncomfortably close to becoming the classic trope of having a dead childhood friend, the best angst material to make up for the lack of whump in Binghe's life. (if one ignores being orphaned twice)

If it had been another random npc, Shang Qinghua would have celebrated. But knowing it was his most dedicated hater who had nearly lost a leg, the idea was not as fun.

Cucumber-bro wasn't some unnamed extra.

"Mu-shishu heals it a little every day, so it's speeding along," Shen Yuan says as if Mu Qingfang dedicating that much time to him isn't the most cheat-code thing of all time. The boy closes the door behind him before he shuffles over to the nearest chair, "he can heal you too, right?"

"Oh, yeah, totally," Shang Qinghua says and looks away from the leg that had nearly become a peg one, "I just need to get rid of the brand first."

Shen Yuan looks green in the face. He puts the crutch away, letting it lean against the desk. He still looks green, though. Matching his uniform. To think that Cucumber-bro is so squeamish.

"Brand?" Shen Yuan echoes.

"Yeah, My King's massive handprint is a big giveaway," Shang Qinghua explains, peering down at his arm. The blue petals cover it all up in their sparkling, bright blue glory, as they do.

Mobei-Jun's hand had left a bright red and numb mark, impossible to mistake for anything else but an ice demon. His claws had dug in, just a bit, pinpricks of red. By now it had stopped bleeding at least. The skin had also gone an off-shade sickly color as it grew more numb as time passed. Having read up on frost injuries, he knew it meant the skin was *dying.* Because that was totally cool and not gross! Haha!

"But I'm sure Qingfang will fix up the broken arm. Just gotta remove the suspicious part," Shang Qinghua adds. It still hurts like a bitch, but at least his King didn't *actually* rip his arm off as he had threatened. And the skin hadn't gone black, so hey, hope remained.

When there is no scathing, bitchy remark, Shang Qinghua looks back at Shen Yuan. The boy

is staring at him, but is quick to avert his eyes when Shang Qinghua stares back. He watches as Cucumber-bro begins to fidget. Tugging at a loose thread in his sleeve, because of course he does. When he needs shit replaced, it's Shang Qinghua who has to put in the work and make sure the request gets to the right place. He should tell him off.

"Bro," Shang Qinghua says instead, "you're being too quiet. It's creepy."

"Shut up," Cucumber-bro huffs, the patented Shen-glare aimed straight at him like a green nail-gun of petulance, "I'm just *thinking."*

"I remember your forum posts. You think too much, bro. You want something, yeah? Tell me or I'll just go back to whining about my woes," he says, and reconsiders. "Actually, I want to whine about my woes anyway. Being a spy *sucks,* dude, it's such bullshit. James Bond was a lie. Where are *my* hotties? My cool spy-gadgets? Huh?"

"Does- does it happen often?" Shen Yuan asks, and Shang Qinghua leans back in his chair and stares.

"What does? Me whining? Yeah! I'm not going to suffer silently in the safety of my own house, fuck that shit! I'll whinge all I want, actually, and now you're *my* prisoner-"

"No! No, I mean, that!" Shen Yuan points at Shang Qinghua's arm, "does Mobei-Jun do *that* a lot?"

Huh.

Is that actual concern??? From Cucumber-bro??? Shang Qinghua has only ever seen that look from Mu Qingfang before. He tries to not reveal any injuries to the rest of the sect- especially not Shen Qingqiu, who is evil and clever enough to figure shit out and would rip Shang Qinghua apart with his own bare hands if he found out about the whole spy thing- but he's pretty damn certain that even if he did tell others he would, at most, get a bland and polite smile from Yue Qingyuan and no one else.

Dude is great. But Shang Qinghua is pretty sure his idea of what's a normal injury is, like, totally fucked up. The point is, there is concern in Shen Yuan's eyes and it makes Shang Qinghua feel weird.

"The frostburn isn't that common," he says, and when Shen Yuan grows pale, he hurriedly continues, "haha! But that's not important! Spies gotta do what they gotta do!"

"Do you have to be?" Shen Yuan blurts out.

"Huh?"

"Do you have to be a spy?" the boy clarifies, very obviously refusing to look at Shang Qinghua now.

This is so fucking weird.

“Yeah, bro,” he says instead of asking if the kid is feeling alright because that is a stupid question to ask, “System will delete my ass if I don’t help with the Abyss, if my King doesn’t get me first. A broken arm is a small price. Like! It totally fucking sucks, don’t get me wrong, and I *will* demand some cash later for it or whatever and obviously I’ll always try my best to *not* piss off the paranoid ice cube-” *the sexiest ice cube there ever was,* he bitterly thinks, “but being a spy is like… one of the basic things I can’t fucking skip out on. I’m not some self-insert like you are.”

“I didn’t choose to be this,” Shen Yuan protests, cheeks going tomato red, haha loser, that’s what he gets for being so pale, “and I was just asking! I don’t have anything Abyss related, and I’m Binghe’s best friend! So I thought- maybe-”

“Uh, okay, first of all? One, unfair! Two, fuck you! And three, Binghe isn’t even supposed to *have* a best friend! My King was the closest he ever got! They were supposed to be the cool duo, you know, emperor and his right hand man. Two super OP-demons fucking up the world for fucking them over!”

“Well, I *am* Binghe’s best friend, so too bad!”

“And how’s that going for you?” Shang Qinghua shoots back, because his arm fucking hurts and yeah, Cucumber-bro is a cute mini-Shen Qingqiu that makes the scum villain like, one percent less terrifying just by existing. But also Shang Qinghua is *tired.* He’s been gone for days, no one outside his peak seemed to notice and his spoiled future King broke his fucking arm for talking to the wrong person!!!!

“You nearly lost your leg, your qi is all fucked up, yeah I heard the rumors!” he rants, gesturing with his non-broken arm, “at this point you’ll just become fodder for his tragic backstory, the bestie who died saving him or some shit like that–”

“I don’t-”

“Poster child for paper skin and glass bones, can’t even fly on that fancy sword of yours now, instead you have to rely on some NPC that will totally get killed in the stupidest way,” and he knows he’s just spitting vitriol now, he *knows* he should shut up. But he never gets to just rant at someone like this, and it’s actually really hard to stop once he’s going, so he keeps doing exactly that as he adds, “I bet he’s going to trip and break his neck on some stairs while helping you-”

“SHUT UP!”

Cucumber-bro’s voice cracks; that, of all things, makes Shang Qinghua’s mouth snap shut.

“Oh shit,” he then says, and Shang Qinghua lurches out of his chair and hurries around the desk, “fuck, alright, it’s- calm down, bro.”

Shen Yuan trembles; sparks jump from his fingers, bursts of silver. It looks like someone is trying to throw out glitter, but it all just keeps dispersing with tiny explosion sounds instead.

It would be funny if not for what it means. Mu Qingfang is going to kill him, Shang Qinghua hysterically thinks, and puts his good hand on Shen Yuan's shoulder.

"Let me help," he says, and when Shen Yuan doesn't try to shrug him off, Shang Qinghua stops circulating his own qi to instead help the kid before him, his gut churning with guilt.

Silence settles. Once Shen Yuan stops trembling, Shang Qinghua slowly removes his hand. Nothing happens, and for a moment he just. Stands there. Stupidly.

"... I've had a really bad week," Shang Qinghua finally says.

It's a lame excuse.

"Whatever," Shen Yuan mumbles, "you're probably right, anyway."

Fuck.

"Bro…"

"I'm not strong enough to be Binghe's friend," Shen Yuan says, and oh *wow,* Shang Qinghua fucked up! Fucked up so hard! He hasn't met his son many times, but he *knows* that the little guy might just kill him, fourteen years old or not, for making Shen Yuan doubt their Super Strong Bromance. Shit! Shit and fuck!

"Dude, I'm *not* good at this," he blurts out, "can we talk about the Abyss instead? Yeah? You know, the whole, uh, me, traitor, spy? That shit?"

Shen Yuan glares at the wall. But slowly he turns those green eyes towards Shang Qinghua, like a very suspicious kitten that has been slightly tempted by a can of cat food.

"... will the System really delete you if you don't do it?" Shen Yuan asks.

It's not forgiveness. But it's a peace offering, a mercy to the white flag which Shang Qinghua had just waved. He takes it.

"Uh, well. My points will get so low I might as well be deleted," Shang Qinghua admits, eyeing Cucumber-bro, but there is still no trembling or sparking, so. Maybe they are good for now? Maybe Mu Qingfang won't skewer him for fucking up his favorite special project? "I got a lot of points, bro, but I also have to use them all the time."

For clues, hints, to lower whatever paranoia induced punishment coming his way. Mobei-Jun really *has* gotten better throughout the like… decade or so that they've known each other. He hardly ever uses his ice powers anymore and half the time Shang Qinghua only *feels* like he got a concussion. So maybe he hasn't used the points for that stuff as much lately, but he *has* used the points to get extra inventory space so that he could hoard more medical supplies. Just in case.

It was so expensive and *so* worth it. Except for this time, because the petals had to be fresh

off the bush.

“So I can’t skip the Abyss. Gotta open it, and my King is already making plans. So… yeah.” Shang Qinghua shrugs.

Shen Yuan stares at him.

“Can you tell me, word for word, what the System says about it?” he asks. And Shang Qinghua looks at this kid, the ‘fourteen going on twenty’ brat that he nearly caused to implode just because Shang Qinghua is too fed up with his own bad karma.

“Sure,” he says, and prepares himself for nitpicking of epic proportions, “sure,” Shang Qinghua repeats, “let’s do this.”

The System, Shen Yuan thinks, fucking sucks.

As Airplane wrote down exactly what the stupid thing had told him, that is just made even more apparent than before. Shen Yuan feels queasy reading the words and their implications, Airplane’s fucked up arm right there as a reminder of how much worse it can get.

The Abyss must be opened.

It must happen at the Immortal Alliance Conference, and Airplane is not allowed to warn anyone or get discovered before the event happens.

Ten-thousand points will be deducted if Airplane fails.

That’s more points than Shen Yuan has ever had in his life, and Airplane looks shifty when asked about how many points he currently has. If not for the fact it would be so much safer and easier to intentionally fail, Shen Yuan would be tempted to call him a lying liar who lies about his points.

“But it doesn’t say Binghe has to fall in,” Shen Yuan says, watching as the blue petals clinging to Airplane’s arm slowly lose their color and begin to peel off, one by one, leaving only lingering bruises behind, “so- so maybe we can stop *that.* It would solve a lot of things, right?”

“I mean, he wouldn’t get his super cool and badass sword,” Shang Qinghua says and leans back with a groan. He looks like a mess; clothes all rumpled, hair just barely still contained in a bun, crown askew. The messy desk and piles of scrolls and paper doesn’t help him in looking like the Immortal Peak Lord that he apparently is, “which means no teleportation. I

guess Shen Qingqiu wouldn't end up a human stick, but my King would still want to snap my neck at some point."

Right.

That.

Most of the time, Shen Yuan is pretty happy with his current lot in life. Yeah, he is weak and branded and stupid about stupid things like girls and people touching his hair, and he always fails at whatever he tries, like trying to run up the wrong escalator with untied shoes. He has no clue what the hell is going on with Shen Qingqiu and him sharing a face, but…

But it's nice being Binghe's friend. It's nice, knowing that he somehow made sure that Binghe didn't spend years being abused and used by an uncaring scum villain. It's nice to know that Binghe will have *him,* at the very least, in between all the traitors and schemers and violence.

However, Shen Yuan looks like he is fourteen. He looks like a lanky kid who shouldn't be allowed to do a single thing, now not even allowed out on missions for a full year. But if he had instead transmigrated into a Peak Lord, or even just a master of some kind…

It feels weird.

Knowing that Airplane is Shang Qinghua and everything that it brings. It does not feel good, knowing that the one guy who remembers computers and energy drinks and pokemon is also the one who has to betray the entire sect in what Shen Yuan remembers reading to be a bloodbath of demonic beasts and horrors.

And it feels super fucking callous, but Shen Yuan can't even bring himself to care that much about the traitor part.

Instead he keeps finding himself staring at Airplane's arm, and how the words ' *the frostburn isn't that common'* had been said so casually, as if getting frostbite was just a tiny concern. It had made it sound like beatings were a daily thing, and no matter how much of a sell-out the author standing before him had been in the past life and this one, no matter how often Airplane annoyed him–

If Shen Yuan was a powerful cultivator, he could help.

Instead he is a stupid little boy with a limp.

"About Shen Qingqiu," he says instead of anything else, "how do we stop the murder?"

Shang Qinghua blinks at him.

"Huh?" the guy says, because he is an idiot.

"The murder," Shen Yuan says, "you know? Liu Qingge? The war god? How do we stop

Shen Qingqiu from killing him? Or is it too late? You're a Peak Lord! Can't you go and join them in the caves and stop it?"

"Stop them? Haha!" Airplane's laughter is fake, and then it twists into something genuine, though a hysterical kind of laughter. The one where you *really* want to stop laughing because it's getting painful but instead you end up wheezing like a deflated balloon, "Me! Stopping them! I might as well try and wield Xin Mo myself! Nope, nope, leave it, I'm not going in there even if I could!"

"Leave- what!" Shen Yuan slams his hands on the desk, "you're just fine with that!? Liu Qingge will *die* and then Shen Qingqiu- you're not even going to *try!?"*

"Bro," Airplane wheezes, "I'm the dead one if I go in there! And Yue Qingyuan isn't even here right now, he's visiting Zhao Hua Monastery, so I couldn't even ask for permission to visit if I wanted to! Which I don't. Also," he adds before Shen Yuan can take the breath to *scream at him,* "I'm like ninety-nine percent sure it's fine."

"HOW!?"

"Uh, well, Shen Qingqiu never *meant* to kill him. In the original draft, anyway." Shang Qinghua stops, and Shen Yuan stares as the man frowns, "though it wasn't what I wrote into the finished product…. Anyway! The *original* draft? Manslaughter, not murder!"

"Are you telling me that Shen Qingqiu was framed," Shen Yuan says, voice blank.

"Bro. My son is *so* good at framing. But this wasn't that. It's not like Bingge ever found out that Liu Qingge's death was an accident," Airplane says, gesturing vaguely, shifting in his chair before he winces. "That is- you know! It was meant to be about, uh, themes and shit."

Shen Yuan stares at the hack author before him and despairs.

That would have been such a cool twist, he thinks, to have *the* scum villain be innocent of at least that crime. Bingge wouldn't have cared at the end of the day, but the way it *could* have forced him to question things- the way-

"And instead we got five chapters of Binghe papapa'ing the Little Palace Mistress," he says, and Airplane shrugs.

"Everyone loved it."

"I didn't!"

"Bro," Airplane gives him a *look* that is so stupid and knowing for no reason, because the son of a bitch does *not,* in fact, know anything about Shen Yuan, "Cucumber-bro, you're the outlier."

"Just because I have standards doesn't- it's not a bad thing! Okay!" Shen Yuan snaps.

Airplane rolls his eyes; but before Shen Yuan can rally himself into the kind of rant which the forums would have dissected for weeks, there is a knock on the door.

They both freeze.

“May this one enter?” Ming Fan’s voice drifts through the door, “this one was told disciple Shen was with Shang-shishu, and this one does not wish to disturb but disciple Shen needs to attend Qing Jing Peak for his lessons…”

“Holy shit,” Airplane whispers, “you’re skipping? You’re cutting class? Cucumber-bro is a delinquent?” He says this with great relish.

“Fuck off,” Shen Yuan hisses, cheeks burning red.

“Come in!” Shang Qinghua instead calls, and Shen Yuan groans and sinks as far down as he can, until he’s in danger of just falling off the chair entirely, “feel free to take him! We’re done here, anyway.”

Maybe Mobei-Jun beats him for a reason, Shen Yuan thinks churlishly, and then immediately feels awful for it.

But only barely.

“I *never* get to see A-Yuan anymore,” Ning Yingying whines at lunch, cheeks puffed up with indignation, chopsticks stabbing at rice in such a way that Shen Yuan thinks it’s a miracle that Ning Yingying manages to get any of it in her mouth at all, “it’s unfair! Why can’t I have a sleepover with Mu-shishu as well?”

“Because A-Ying didn’t almost lose a leg,” Shen Yuan mutters and pokes at- what is *that?* It’s small and orange, some kind of berry. He does *not* recognize what the fuck it is. A gooseberry? No, surely not.

“A-Yuan shouldn’t be rewarded for that,” Ning Yingying huffs.

Wow.

Wow the fuck???

Shen Yuan stares at her. No one else in the dining hall seems to have heard her, or if they did, they perhaps decided they heard wrong.

Where did the cute, sweet Shijie go??? What was *that.*

“Excuse me?” he asks, because what else can he even say to that insanity? Clearly, she doesn’t know how awful it can get, sitting on the couch, forced to watch Wei Qingwei flirt with Mu Qingfang. It is *not* a reward, and it’s not even because of his leg that he’s there!

“First A-Luo gets to sleep with you in Shizun’s house,” Ning Yingying continues, which is a very late complaint, it’s been a year, and also isn’t she too *old* to whine like this? Isn’t she fifteen? Besides, she will be the one who gets to papapa– “and now A-Yuan gets to go and sleep in a much bigger, more interesting house-”

“I can’t believe you just called Shizun’s house *boring.”*

“I did not! It’s just less interesting than Mu-shishu’s,” Ning Yingying argues, stabbing her chopsticks in Shen Yuan’s direction, “because Mu-shishu is a healer! And the best one! See, I’ve heard all about how dual cultivation is important–”

Oh no.

“Oh no,” he whispers out loud, but Ning Yingying barrels on, just like how she always did in the original. She always ran into traps and dangers of all kinds, always needing to be rescued.

Shen Yuan would like to be rescued this time.

“– to a lot of ailments, and a girl from Xian Shu recommended this one book about a maiden who fell in love with a magical healer and do you think that there really are *swings* made for–”

“I’m leaving,” Shen Yuan blurts out, scrambling for his crutch, for any rescue at all, “I’m- this one is done! Bye!”

“A-Yuan didn’t even finish eating,” Ning Yingying huffs, her brown eyes narrow, and why would! Why would she read porn??? That was clearly what she was reading, wasn’t it??? Ning Yingying! Reading porn!

She was supposed to be the innocent shimei–

Wait.

Shen Yuan pauses and stares at her.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* she was the Shimei to Luo Binghe’s Shixiong. That was a thing. But now she was a Shijie… was she fifteen in the original too? Or was she not? Why would- that was such a *stupid* change though, it made absolutely no sense! How would this affect the future childhood crush vibes?

“A-Yuan should close his mouth,” she tells him as he stares, “flies might fly in there, it’s

really gross when that happens."

"Why are you my Shijie?" he asks, bewildered, "how did that happen?"

Ning Yingying huffs.

"A-Ying was here first," she says like he's an idiot, and steals the orange berry from his plate, because she has never actually been sweet, clearly. He remembers how she happily, obliviously insults people to their faces, safe from harm under Shen Qingqiu's favoritism, "and! And I'm older, too. This is why I should get to sleep in my own room…"

And just like that, the sulking clears. She smiles, bright as a summer morning, as bright as the orange ribbons in her hair.

"Does A-Yuan think I can ask for one? Surely they can't say no anymore!"

"I think I heard Zhu-shixiong call for me," he lies, and hobbles away as quickly as he can, leaving the remains of his lunch behind to be consumed by Ning Yingying.

She doesn't hesitate before she pulls the tray closer.

She's a growing girl, after all.

It's hours before Zhu Kang is meant to come and get him. Shen Yuan lingers by the entrance to the dining hall, giving awkward smiles to those who pass by as he pretends that Ning Yingying didn't just imply that Mu Qingfang owns a sexswing.

As Shen Yuan clings to sanity, he considers going to the library to pass the time, still not allowed to join the other disciples in sword training. It is a comfortable space, nearby and easy to get to. He could read up on the Abyss again, maybe make a quiz sheet or something for Binghe when he returns from his mission.

Instead Shen Yuan ends up at the tree.

Even though he had promised himself to not go there until he could walk without crutches. Even though he will be alone there; Shen Yuan still drags himself to their tree and flops down in an ungraceful, lanky sprawl amongst the tall grass.

It's not like anyone is mowing the area.

Shen Yuan watches the leaves sway in the wind that always seem to drift through Qing Jing

Peak. He can't even see the blue sky with how thick the canopy is. Nothing but endless, shifting green.

There's hope, he decides, staring at all that green.

He and Airplane will figure it out. Neither have to push Binghe into the Endless Abyss, and so that means there must be a way to make sure that Shen Qingqiu doesn't do it. At the very least, maybe he and Binghe can just run away if the whole 'half demon in hiding' thing is revealed. It will be fine. It has to be. It would be a cool training arc, him and Binghe, exploring the world and hiding from those hunting them. Much better than Binghe ending up in the Abyss, alone and unarmed.

And in the meantime, maybe Shen Yuan can ask Mu Qingfang for pointers, basic first-aid at the very least. Then Airplane wouldn't have to go and risk blowing his cover every single time that Mobei-Jun…

But he would still be getting hurt. And the Abyss still needs to be opened. It's- what, three years left before the Immortal Alliance Conference? Three years to figure shit out, which should be plenty and *yet.* And yet it doesn't feel like enough time at all.

Shen Yuan sits up with a groan, tugging his hair free from the hairpin. It dug against his scalp, a pinch of discomfort from laying down on the ground. He looks at the fox on it, frowning as he twirls it around his fingers. Or tries to. He mostly drops it, fingers clumsy, unsteady.

"Can I use *my* points for the Abyss stuff?" he asks the System.

(Host does not have any Quests related to the Abyss Storyline.)

"That's not what I'm asking, and you know it," Shen Yuan snaps, "I'm Binghe's best friend, aren't I? I'll be there too! It would be bullshit if I can't affect *anything."*

(Host does not have any Quests related to the Abyss-)

"Is this payback for muting you all the time?" he wonders, "because that is very childish of you, you know."

(Error: This System can only identify one child.)

Shen Yuan presses the heel of his palm against his eyes, groaning. He does so until he has to blink away spots from it, letting his hands fall back into the grass.

He wishes he had brought Fu Yue.

But he had left the sword back at Mu Qingfang's; there had been no point, bringing it with him when he wasn't allowed to train or fly with it. He doesn't even want it for that now, though. The gentle hum of it is soothing. A better thing to focus on than the System being of no help.

He keeps meaning to ask Wei Qingwei about it.

“Yuan?”

Shen Yuan’s breath hitches.

He sits up so fast his hair falls over his eyes. Shen Yuan hurriedly pushes his hair away from his face, heart beating as his chest grows warm. Dark eyes meet his, and Shen Yuan’s cheeks hurt with how wide he smiles, and Binghe’s smile is just as wide.

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan says and gets onto his feet, but in his excitement he forgets that his leg is still injured. A *squeak* escapes him as he stumbles, arms pinwheeling in the air. But he never hits the ground.

Instead Binghe catches him, an *oompf* sound forced out as they both nearly tumble down onto the ground. But Binghe manages to steady them, and Shen Yuan laughs and hugs him, standing at a weird angle and not caring at all.

Luo Binghe giggles and hugs him back, and Shen Yuan burrows his face against his shoulder and pretends he’s not grinning like a loon.

Eventually he pulls back enough to look over Binghe. The other boy looks tired but happy, still in his travel clothes. Zheng Yang slides back into its sheath- Binghe must have flown directly to their tree, the moment he was allowed to leave.

“Still clumsy,” Binghe teases, and Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. He wants to huff and glare, but there is no way he can stop smiling. So instead he gives Binghe’s earlobe a scolding tug. Not that Luo Binghe seems sorry at all, smile only growing impossibly wide.

“You’re back early,” Shen Yuan says.

“I promised it would be a week at most,” Luo Binghe replies, holding Shen Yuan steady. The crutch lays forgotten, still leaning against their tree. He should probably pick it up. Instead he stays where he is.

“Oh, so Binghe is late then?” Shen Yuan asks and picks out a leaf from the other boy’s hair. The wind tugs it away from his fingers, but he doesn’t watch as it flies off. Binghe looks fine; up until just now, Shen Yuan didn’t realize how worried he was. The relief is a heady thing, and he can’t help but hug his best friend again.

“Did Yuan miss me?” Binghe asks, happy to return the hug once more.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” Shen Yuan says, voice muffled against his thick hair.

“I missed you too,” Binghe mumbles, and Shen Yuan closes his eyes and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

MF, wild-eyed: where??? is my shidi??? doesn't he know he has calligraphy lessons today!??
Wan Jian disciple: wow does Qing Jing disciples just have no duties? Why is shixiong (derogatory) always flying around?
MF: Oh? This one has a very good reason for flying between peaks. Better question, why is shidi (derogatory) always flying around? Is he not trusted with forging new swords? The thing his peak is supposedly an EXPERT in? HM??? Perhaps he only knows how to fly and not make them, wow, so shameful-
WJ disciple: I bet your calligraphy sucks as much as your flying
MF: I will stab you
WJ disciple: with what? a brush? lmao
Cat Fight

Holidays are crazy :D

Thank you guys for all the amazing comments!!! And for the patience <3
Both in me very very slowly replying to them and also for the fact you guys have been so supportive and patient with the delayed new updates. Thank!!! You!!!

btw fish are cool animals. I feel like they get very little credit but, like..... they're so cool. You ever looked at a discus fish? Did you know they basically make milk from their skin to feed their babies??? So weird. I love them. One pattern they can have is called blood pigeon. WHY??? Anyway aquariums are cool. Please research on how to properly care for your fish <3

nannarts has drawn this amazing lineup of SY and LBH aging throughout the fic! Look at that epic glare of SY, ahh!!! Truly takes after SQQ <3

also if you look below, Prim the Amazing has gone and written a very, very good Zhao De/Ming Fan oneshot! Do read the tags, it is NOT for the faint of heart.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zhu Kang likes visiting Qing Jing Peak.

It is a very green place; it appears to be so much more elegant and beautiful, with its swaying bamboo and how there is always music traveling through the air. Those who belong to it meander around, murmuring between themselves as they discuss the four arts. There is no hurry for them, nothing that cannot wait a moment more.

Qian Cao Peak is home, but it is not an elegant nor a peaceful place.

Nature does not thrive in the same way as it does on Qing Jing. Bamboo and tall grass does not crowd around trees, wildflowers do not sway in the breeze. It is all instead carefully planned out and practical, all greenery there to be used, not to be admired. There are no fans or scrolls painted with the gardens of Qian Cao Peak.

All of their art is depictions of medically useful plants and animals. There is no need to make things beautiful when your goal is to make it *accurate.*

Up until recently, Zhu Kang was rarely allowed to visit Qing Jing Peak. Shen Qingqiu did not like to have visitors with no cause, and Qian Cao disciples were too busy to linger for long. But Shen Yuan is friendlier, his face soft in comparison to Shen Qingqiu's, despite the fact they share the same sharp angles. But it is different, when Shen Yuan's green eyes look so much more inviting and…

As Zhu Kang walks up the stairs which cling to the sides of cliffs and rolling hills, he tucks away stray locks that refuse to remain tied back. He smoothes out his uniform and taps a finger against the jade bird dangling from his sword.

He is arriving early.

Hours ahead of time, but in his defense, his Shifu had asked him to fetch Shen Yuan. There has been no reason given, but Zhu Kang doesn't mind. It only means he gets to spend more time around the boy, though he finds it a little funny that he dropped him off at An Ding and now has to track him down on Qing Jing.

Shen Yuan is fragile and sickly, always a touch too pale, his hair always just a little messier than it should be, Mu Qingfang protective of him in a way that is rare to see. And yet, Zhu Kang always finds himself facing the challenge of tracking him down. For a boy who relies on a crutch, Shen Yuan certainly gets around.

Zhu Kang smoothes his hair down as much as he can one final time before he lets his hands fall down to rest by his side, relaxed and at ease. He abandons the stone stairs in favor of a

path leading up towards the tree which Ning Yingying had told him that Shen Yuan was likely at. As Zhu Kang has found the boy there once before, the information seems reliable.

Once he is close enough, he opens his mouth to call out, only to shut his mouth at the sight that greets him.

There is not only Shen Yuan, but another boy. They sit by the base of the tree, heads pressed together as the new boy holds out a scroll, tilting it for Shen Yuan to read.

The newcomer is wearing the Qing Jing uniform, green and white, but Zhu Kang doesn't recognize him. Not that it says much- Zhu Kang only really recognizes Shen Yuan, Ming Fan and Ning Yingying due to circumstances. Still, Shen Yuan seems to know the boy just fine, and they *do* look the same age.

So it must be Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan has mentioned him several times, his best friend, out on a mission to help with a fox spirit. Most sentences can be trusted to contain Luo Binghe's name if they fall from Shen Yuan's lips.

Zhu Kang watches them for a moment, then shrugs and continues to walk as he waves in greeting.

"Shen-shidi!" he calls out, and both boys look up as one. Green and dark eyes- brown? Black? He can't tell from this distance- blink at him in sync. "This one hopes he's not interrupting?"

"Oh, Zhu-shixiong," Shen Yuan says and smiles, the one that makes him look so much less like a tiny Shen Qingqiu, and more like someone warm and sweet, enough that the rumors of Yue Qingyuan being the other father seems more possible, "this one greets Shixiong," Shen Yuan adds and does a clumsy half-bow from where he is sitting. It makes his hair spill forward.

It's not tied up. It hangs loose like spilled ink, which Zhu Kang is *certain* wasn't the case that morning. How long has it been free? He tucks his hands behind his back, because Mu-shifu had said that Shen Yuan didn't like being touched without warning. No matter how much Zhu Kang wants to reach out and help.

A Healer must be patient and respectful.

"This one greets Shidi," he easily replies and comes to a stop before them. He crouches and smiles at Shen Yuan, and then looks towards the boy who must be Luo Binghe.

From Shen Yuan's stories, Zhu Kang had assumed the boy to be a bright one, warm and cheeky, perhaps a healthier version of Shen Yuan himself.

But instead he meets eyes that scrutinize him in such a way that Zhu Kang wonders if he looks messier than usual. To be quite honest, it would not be the first time he thought he

made himself presentable, only to find he fell short by a large margin. But Luo Binghe's eyes are piercing in a distinctly uncomfortable way that reminds him of his grandmother. Despite being their shixiong, Zhu Kang has to fight the urge to straighten his posture.

"And this is?" he asks after a moment, and Luo Binghe blinks and gives him a polite smile, perfect and kind.

"This one is Luo Binghe," the boy greets, and nods his head, perfectly polite. Maybe Zhu Kang just imagined the way those eyes stared.

"Pleased to meet Luo-shidi," he replies, and then looks back to Shen Yuan. The boy is looking between them, playing with his sleeves, bitten nails uneven against green fabric, "this one is here for Shen-shidi, and hopes he does not interrupt anything important?"

"Ah- well," Shen Yuan falters, looking back at the scroll in Luo Binghe's hands, now half rolled up. Zhu Kang doesn't try to catch a peek at it. "May this one ask why…?"

"Mu-shifu would like to speak with Shidi," Zhu Kang admits, "but this one can't say why. Only that this one was told to go and fetch Shidi."

Shen Yuan slumps in what is clear disappointment; considering how often he speaks of his friend, Zhu Kang does feel a little bit bad about it. Luo Binghe clearly only just arrived- still dusty from travel, the standard bag for all disciples on missions laying by his side- and it must be frustrating to have to leave so soon after reuniting. He glances towards Luo Binghe and nearly flinches.

"Well," Shen Yuan sighs sadly, "this one won't keep Mu-shishu waiting. Binghe," he says, and the dark look on Luo Binghe's face abruptly clears, as if it was never there, face turned towards Shen Yuan once more and leaving Zhu Kang blinking, "perhaps- well, Binghe hasn't had time to clean himself yet, so while this one is gone…?"

"Is Yuan saying this one smells?" Luo Binghe asks, smiling.

"What? No, never," Shen Yuan says in a way that implies *yes, a bit,* and doesn't even blink at the way Luo Binghe addressed him, "but this one must speak with Mu-shishu either way! About tonight, so- so Binghe should take the time to settle in, yes?"

"Of course, Yuan," and Luo Binghe lets the scroll roll back up and puts it into his bag. Zhu Kang grabs the crutch which lays too far away for Shen Yuan to reach. Before he can offer it to Shen Yuan, however, Luo Binghe has already pulled the other boy up onto his feet.

"Thank you, Binghe," Shen Yuan smiles, squeezing the hand holding his, "this one will return soon!"

"Before Yuan leaves," Luo Binghe says and holds out a familiar hairpin, the crude one that looks like a fox and is often found in Shen Yuan's hair. Shen Yuan sees it and flushes an endearing pink, like the cherry blossoms that now fall from the trees at Long Shen Peak. Zhu Kang curls his fingers into his palm.

“Thank you, Binghe,” the Shen Yuan says, and Zhu Kang watches as he puts his hair up, just enough to be proper for company. It’s a little bit crooked, but before he can offer to fix it, Luo Binghe tells Shen Yuan which way to push the hairpin a bit more.

Shen Yuan makes sure to wave as they fly off, Zhu Kang carefully holding him as they do so, the crutch awkwardly cradled in Shen Yuan’s arms. The weather is nice, the sky is busy and Zhu Kang wonders if he did something to make Shen Yuan’s friend hate him.

He doesn’t ask that, of course. Shen Yuan is such a sweet one, and Zhu Kang would hate to make him feel anything but happy about his friend’s return.

“Is Shixiong *sure* that he can’t tell me?” Shen Yuan asks as they land not in the garden of Mu Qingfang, but outside one of the healing wards.

“This one doesn’t know, Shidi,” Zhu Kang says with a smile, very politely helping Shen Yuan to step off of the sword, handing over the crutch, “this one can’t tell Shidi what one doesn’t know, correct?”

Shen Yuan sighs.

“Well, yes,” he agrees, and Zhu Kang laughs that *hehe* laugh of his, the one that makes Shen Yuan bite his own lip to avoid joining it and badly failing, “but this one had to be sure! This,” and he gestures at the building before them, at the Qian Cao cultivators rushing in and out, some looking more frazzled than others. “Was not where this one expected to visit.”

“If Shidi is nervous, this one is happy to accompany him,” Zhu Kang says, gentling his voice as he sheaths his sword, “but this one does think that Shifu would warn Shen-shidi if there was to be a medical procedure.”

Hmpf.

Sure.

Or Mu Qingfang planned it to be a surprise to make sure that Shen Yuan wouldn’t work himself up into a fit. It doesn’t sound too OOC, if you ask him, and he eyes two disciples who are scrambling out of the building with wild eyes and too many scrolls in their arms.

“What *is* this ward for?” he asks.

Due to all the weird problems which *Proud Immortal Demon Way* is capable of creating,

especially for a top ranked sect with twelve different subcategories, Qian Cao has several buildings dedicated to very specific things.

It is truly fascinating- it's not something that Airplane had gone into details in the story, but it's a logical way for things to be handled. Shen Yuan knows that he has most often ended up in the one for qi deviations specifically and he knows it's designed with strengthened walls, soothing talismans and charms to calm you the fuck down. He also knows it's one of two of the only wards that focuses on individual rooms rather than having curtains between patients. Having someone see you go through a qi deviation tends to be very unhelpful.

The other one with the same set-up is, uh, not one he likes to think about. Especially not after Ning Yingying's talk about *sex swings.*

"This one is for common injuries, not the life threatening ones," Zhu Kang explains, "it is our biggest and most busy ward." He pauses. "The Bai Zhan raids began today, so there's likely a lot of, ah, chaos in there at the moment. This one can see if Shifu has time to step outside rather than making Shen-shidi walk through it all?"

"The- wait," Shen Yuan straightens up, "the Bai Zhan raids? What does Shixiong mean they *began* today…?"

"Has Shidi not heard of them?" Zhu Kang asks, clearly surprised.

"This one has *heard* of the raids, this one only thought… well, with Qing Jing Peak… and why *now?"*

It's a very good question!

In the original, Qing Jing Peak was seemingly always under attack from Bai Zhan Peak. Whenever Luo Binghe wasn't beaten black and blue by his own fellow disciples and Shizun, there the Bai Zhan disciples were, kicking ass, kicking doors, kicking *Binghe.* They were very cool, of course, even with that last part. After all they didn't *only* kick Binghe and they didn't kick Binghe for being himself, unlike Ming Fan and his minions.

Shen Yuan had honestly forgotten about it all though. Because there hadn't *been* any attacks on Qing Jing Peak, if one didn't count that time Liu Qingge kicked Binghe in the face while shaking Shen Yuan like he was some kind of naughty cat.

"It is likely because Liu Qingge is gone-"

Shen Yuan's breath hitches; his very core suddenly ice cold, because what, no, no, Airplane *said–*

"-so they are taking the opportunity to cause some chaos until he returns," Zhu Kang continues, and Shen Yuan forces himself to breathe, feeling abruptly ridiculous, "and… is everything alright? Shidi looks pale," Zhu Kang fusses, and Shen Yuan only barely avoids flinching when the other boy presses his hand to Shen Yuan's brow.

“This one is fine,” he reassures him and dares to reach up to carefully push Zhu Kang’s hand away, “only tired, Shixiong.”

“Shidi *has* been doing a lot today,” Zhu Kang agrees, but his red-brown eyes still look him over, the scar that goes from his chin and nearly touches his mouth looking stretched as he purses his lips, “visiting Shang-shishu, going to lessons, meeting his friend…”

“Who is waiting,” Shen Yuan points out, and gestures towards the ward, “as is Mu-shishu! Shall we go visit him now?”

“Shidi must promise to tell this one if-”

“If this one feels worse, yes, yes,” Shen Yuan nods along and hurries his very best towards the door, decisively pushing away any ideas about Liu Qingge being *gone-gone,* “this one promises.”

The inside of the building is in chaos, just like he had been warned.

He spots more than one Bai Zhan disciple trying to escape- and failing, as the healers are more than ready to tackle them to the floor to prevent any such plans- while the Peak they had, ah, ambushed… the uniforms say it’s the Ku Xing Peak, what a *choice,* going for the Peak filled with inedia riddled teenagers??? Maybe it was considered a warm-up?

Either way, the disciples of Ku Xing are all glowering furiously from their own beds as they are patched up. Some are making attempts to get revenge, but those attempts are not as chaotic as the Bai Zhan disciples' escape attempts. It kind of looks like cats trying to escape a cold bath. But more rabid, and the bath-giver being either a very tired master or horrified Qian Cao disciples doing a bad job of avoiding getting scratched.

It’s not *that* bad, Shen Yuan thinks. There’s only like ten people from each side, at most, and it seems pretty even. All of them are either his age or just a year or two older.

Of course it seemed worse in the original; Binghe had spent most of his disciple days half-starved, exhausted and struggling with cultivation. But it was a relief to see that in the end, it was kids being kids. Now, with Binghe well fed and trained and doing so well*,* it wouldn’t be as awful of a beat down. If a beat down at all; Shen Yuan imagines that with the power of the halo and a well-fed body, he could *totally* beat the shit out of any of these Bai Zhan disciples.

Oblivious to the way some of those Bai Zhan disciples zeroed in on him, Shen Yuan hobbled along towards where Zhu Kang was directing him.

Mu Qingfang is further in and a little more separated; a curtain cutting him off from view until Zhu Kang held it away for Shen Yuan to duck under. It was not the kind of privacy which Shen Yuan was used to when he visited but, well. Usually he was about to explode like a bomb made of qi, so. It was different. Despite that, the curtain is stitched with symbols that muffles the outside more than it logically should.

“Ah, there Yuan-shizhi is,” Mu Qingfang greets with a quick smile and a nod. Despite the

chaos that can still be heard- muffled as it is, it is still *there*- he does not look too frazzled, his hands steady as he notes something down on a scroll, “hope all is well?”

“All is well, Shishu. This one was told that Shishu wanted to see me?” Shen Yuan says, peering curiously at the patient on the bed.

Anime protagonist, he thinks, and has to bite back a smile when the boy glares at him. But the boy really *could* pass for an anime protagonist, if not for the fact that Luo Binghe was *the* protagonist of the world.

The boy on the bed is scrawny and covered in bruises quickly turning blue; he is pale, probably the palest person that Shen Yuan has ever seen. Which makes sense; with his white hair and pale blue eyes, he is clearly a case of human albinism. He is very eye-catching for sure, which probably means that in the original, he died off-screen or turned into an evil bitch for Binghe to slay.

At the moment, he looks a bit like a ferret that’s been soaked through and tossed around. It looks like he went into a boxing ring and lost twenty times in a row. There is a split lip, matching black eyes and it also looks like someone tried to scratch at least one of those eyes out of him. His hair is an uneven mass and Shen Yuan winces when Mu Qingfang casually fixes a broken nose.

Yikes.

The boy muffles his curses and snaps his teeth after Mu Qingfang’s hands and it’s all a bit too familiar for Shen Yuan’s taste.

“Why did Mu-shishu wish to see this one?” Shen Yuan asks, having a growing suspicion. He had briefly considered if it had anything to do with Shang Qinghua, but now…

“This is Lin Jie from Bai Zhan Peak,” Mu Qingfang says, before he looks towards Zhu Kang, “perhaps Zhu Kang could go and help the others while this master speaks with Yuan-shizhi?”

“Yes, Shifu,” Zhu Kang bows and leaves Shen Yuan with them. Lin Jie eyes Shen Yuan, and he eyes him back. The boy looks like he must be younger than him, but it’s hard to say. Thankfully the silence does not have time to grow awkward before Mu Qingfang speaks once more.

“This one knows that Shizhi has been reading a lot about healing since he began to stay with this one,” Mu Qingfang says, gesturing for Shen Yuan to come closer, “and Lin-shizhi is in need of some guidance.”

“Am not!” Lin Jie says; distinctly nasally from the broken nose having just been fixed, though whatever pain he feels must not be enough to stop that killer glare he has got going on as he snarls, “I’m not some weak-!”

“Considering Lin-shizhi’s age, he has done very well in this fight,” Mu Qingfang calmly cuts

in, rendering the boy mute with confusion, “being the youngest of Bai Zhan Peak is, however, not an easy thing to be. As Shen Yuan is at the moment not allowed to go out on missions for a year, nor to practice any type of martial arts until his leg is fully healed, this master thought it would be a good match.”

Shen Yuan stares.

“But… this one is from Qing Jing,” he points out.

Like there is a very obvious problem here. First of all, he’s not an actual trained professional! Second of all, he has a crutch. *Third* of all, Qing Jing and Bai Zhan are infamous for not getting along, and the mere mention of it has Lin Jie bristling on the bed. How the kid didn’t know where Shen Yuan came from, he’s not sure. Maybe Lin Jie is brand new and hasn’t figured out that green stands for Four Arts and Too Much Bamboo?

“This master is aware,” Mu Qingfang smiles, “however, this one is not suggesting that Yuan-shizhi practices proper healing. Merely to keep an eye out, and that if Lin Jie is in need of assistance, to help him receive help in a more… discreet manner. And perhaps to offer lessons which Bai Zhan Peak considers less important.” A pause. “Such as reading.”

Oh.

That does make sense. Shen Yuan *has* been reading just enough to feel confident in handling, say, normal injuries from training. And if it was more serious than that, no one would blink at Shen Yuan asking for Mu Qingfang or Zhu Kang to visit.

And he *is* pretty confident in his ability to teach reading. While Binghe received lessons like all other disciples of Qing Jing Peak, Shen Yuan knows he helped his friend a lot as well. And Binghe made sure to tell him he was a good teacher! And Ning Yingying, for all her whining, does know how to braid her own hair now.

“I can do that,” Shen Yuan nods, ignoring the furious fuming of the boy beside them as the System rewards him with ten F-points, “however, Shishu, this one also needs to inform… that is…” He glances at Lin Jie, who promptly bares his teeth in a snarl.

He really is not very threatening. Like at all.

Shen Yuan kind of wants to pat his head and give him a bath. Maybe check him for fleas. He doesn’t look like he has had a bath for months, or even like he knows how to use chopsticks. Shen Yuan’s fingers twitch and he clears his throat, looking away.

Lin Jie adopts a victorious and smug grin, clearly deciding he won the battle of wills.

“Binghe is back,” Shen Yuan says, and Mu Qingfang raises a brow, “so- so this one was thinking that, until, that is- until Binghe needs to leave again, would it be alright for this one to sleep back at Qing Jing?”

He knows that logically, there should be no problem. Even Shen Qingqiu had specified

before he left *(without a goodbye!!!)* that he would only have to stay away from the Bamboo house whenever Binghe was gone.

But as Mu Qingfang scrutinizes him, Shen Yuan can't help but feel worried. If the man says no, it's not like Shen Yuan can go against him. Binghe would be forced to sleep alone in an empty house and their time would be cut even *more* short by the distance and time between peaks.

"Breathe, Yuan-shizhi," Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan gasps for the breath he hadn't realized he stopped taking, "this master will allow it."

The relief is staggering. Shen Yuan feels his face grow warm with how embarrassingly obvious he is, Lin Jie's stare impossible to ignore. He offers a bow.

"Thank you, Mu-shishu."

"There is no need for such things. However, before you leave to gather your things, let this one show you how to clean the wounds of someone who bites," Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan swears he hears Lin Jie *hiss* like some demented little gremlin.

The relief is promptly gone.

As he narrowly avoids snapping teeth while smearing healing salve onto a squirming child, Shen Yuan feels like this might just be karma.

In truth, Shen Yuan barely brought anything with him to Qian Cao Peak. He most certainly had not brought a whole bag of books, heavy enough that Zhu Kang had nearly dropped it out of sheer shock before the older boy rallied and pretended it was perfectly normal.

The thing is… if he is going to somehow make Lin Jie into a vaguely civilized person, he needs help, alright? And that includes books on how to treat common ailments! Because even if Lin Jie is perhaps a bit too feral, he is also just a little boy of thirteen years (if he is speaking the truth, but he is so *scrawny)* who clearly needs to be fed properly and get some fantasy band-aids slapped onto his wounds every now and then.

It just hits a bit too close to home.

Besides, Mu Qingfang doesn't *need* all those books. He is the Peak Lord of healing and was the sole survivor after Luo Binghe destroyed the sect in the original *because* he was too useful to just kill. So he shouldn't mind that Shen Yuan is, ah, borrowing them for a bit!

And it will also help in covering for Shang Qinghua.

Shen Yuan had made brief eye-contact with him on the way out; Airplane had finally made his way over to Qian Cao Peak to ask for help with his broken arm, which was a relief. It had also been a reminder that it was one of the few things Shen Yuan could maybe do to help.

So he has a bag filled with books, one he can't carry himself with the crutch. Which leads to Zhu Kang landing right in front of the bamboo house, one hand holding the bag and the other helping Shen Yuan step off of his sword.

It's been five days since Shen Yuan last visited the bamboo house.

There just hadn't been a reason to go there; not with Shen Qingqiu gone, not with Binghe away on the mission, not with Shen Yuan stuck being babysat by Mu Qingfang and Wei Qingwei. And five days hadn't been *that* long, he tells himself. Binghe *had* said it would take at most a week! So five days was nothing.

It's still nice, though. Going up to the bamboo house and hearing movement from the kitchen, smelling the beginnings of dinner. Helping Lin Jie had taken longer than Shen Yuan thought it would, had been more draining than expected, followed by Mu Qingfang giving more instructions on his stupid leg and… and he hadn't finished eating his food earlier that day.

His stomach growls and Shen Yuan blushes as Zhu Kang laughs and opens the door.

"This one is here to deliver a Shen Yuan," the older boy calls out, then turns towards Shen Yuan and holds up the bag, "where does Shidi want this?"

"Ah, um, Shixiong can put it by the table," Shen Yuan says.

"Is Shidi sure?" Zhu Kang wonders, eyes going towards his hands. Shen Yuan grumbles and hurries to sit down by the table so that he can tuck them out of view. They are red and sore from Lin Jie actually managing to get him a couple of times, and Zhu Kang had fussed over it ever since he saw, "this one would not mind putting them in Shidi's room."

"That's-"

"This one can do so later," Binghe says, and smiles when they look to him, standing by the kitchen doorway, "this one greets Shixiong," he continues, and Shen Yuan squints at him, wondering which one he is calling Shixiong, because it *should* be Zhu Kang, but also something in his face– "but this one apologizes, I've only made enough food for two…"

"Oh, that is alright," Zhu Kang replies and puts the bag down next to Shen Yuan, a too loud *thump* from it when the books begin to fall over, "this one must return to Shifu! Now, Shidi, if your hands are still sore tomorrow, then- ah." Zhu Kang pauses. "Shifu said that Shidi will stay here for a while now?"

"Until Binghe leaves on another mission, yes," Shen Yuan nods, hiding his hands under the table, "so Shixiong won't have to spend so much time flying this one around now! Ah, not

that this one isn't grateful, just- that is…" he clears his throat. "A-Anyway! Mu-shishu also said that this one should be able to walk without a crutch in a week from now, and then after training… um…"

"Well, until Shidi can fly by himself, this Shixiong is still happy to help," Zhu Kang says with a smile.

"T-Thank you…"

Once Zhu Kang leaves, Binghe being a good host and seeing him to the door, Shen Yuan watches as his friend turns to stare at him. For a moment, he just takes it in.

Binghe's hair is still heavy from his bath, but not dripping. It's shiny, his cheeks still rosy from it and his clothes are now pristine. Sleeves have been tied back the way he does when he cooks, revealing a few scratches on his arms that he had mentioned getting from the fox spirit.

It's not that he was actually smelly before. Shen Yuan had implied it, sure, but apparently being the protagonist means that a Binghe who spent days traveling still doesn't *stink.* It was not a clean smell, but- but Shen Yuan hadn't minded leaning in to read the scroll which Binghe had been gifted by a farmer for being the one to slay the spirit.

But now Binghe looks more at peace. More relaxed, though his eyes are intent as he goes and kneels next to Shen Yuan, reaching-

Oh no!

He tries to yank his hands away, but it's too late. Binghe holds them up for inspection, dark eyes narrowing as he takes in how red they are.

"What happened?" Binghe asks, "isn't Yuan supposed to get *healed* at Qian Cao Peak, not more hurt?"

"That's- it's not *that* bad," he protests, curling his fingers against Binghe's hands when the other boy doesn't let him go, "if it was, Mu-shishu would have healed it before I left! This is just… weren't you cooking? Shouldn't you finish doing that? What if you burn the food, Binghe? A true shame!"

"As if I would *ever,"* Binghe huffs, but he still lets Shen Yuan tug his hands free as he gets up to return to the kitchen, "and it's simmering now! So it should be fine. But Yuan didn't answer. What made your hands like that?"

"... Shishu asked me to help him with a patient," Shen Yuan admits, pulling out one of the books from his bag, "and, ah. The patient didn't like being treated."

"Oh, like Yuan," Binghe says, and Shen Yuan can't see him anymore but he can *hear* that grin, damn it!

“I’m not *that* bad! I don’t bite Shishu!”

“Didn’t you say you once tried to kick him in the face?”

“That does not count,” Shen Yuan grumbles, flipping the book open, “I was having a qi deviation, I’m excused. I’ve read all about them lately, the fact I only try to explode and kick people is *minor.* Some people can turn back into children, did you know that? Or- or grow *animal parts,”* which was the dumbest thing he had ever heard of, but he distinctly remembered Airplane writing about it.

“Yuan would be a cat,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan jolts to see food being put down on the table, “a little kitten.”

“I’m taller than you,” Shen Yuan protests, watching as more and more food is added to the table, his eyebrows going higher for each plate, “Binghe… didn’t you say there was only enough for two?”

“You’re hungry and I’m a growing boy,” Binghe replies and releases an over the top sad sigh, startling a laugh from Shen Yuan, “I really wasn’t sure if there would be enough for him!”

“How did you even get so much food from the kitchens?” he laughs, pulling a plate with greens in chili oil closer, “will the rest of the Peak have any left for tonight?”

“They have rice,” Binghe says, taking the book away and putting it aside as Shen Yuan begins to pile food onto his plate, stomach growling loud enough to be heard, “though Shijie did ask for some mooncakes. And then spoke about the horses, even though I’m sure she saw me fly on the sword when I left.”

“Oh, I need to visit Bao, I haven’t seen him since the mission–”

It’s so easy, settling back into each other’s company. Binghe has cooked enough food for a small army, but they still somehow manage to eat it all. They really *are* growing boys after all, bottomless pits for stomachs. Being practicing cultivators probably only makes it worse.

“Should I prepare a bath for you?” Binghe asks as they clean up- a brief battle of wills ensued until Shen Yuan was allowed to dry the dishes.

“Nah, Mu-shishu showed me how to use a cleaning talisman on Lin Jie, and I tried it out on myself,” Shen Yuan says, setting aside the last plate, “so I’m clean. And also if I move too much I might throw up.”

“Do those things make you *feel* clean though?”

“It’s not as nice as a bath, but it works. Better than trying to give Lin Jie a bath, anyway. I really might lose a few fingers if I were to try it now…”

“Maybe I should talk with him. Make sure he behaves.”

“Nope, I’ll handle it. Ah- do you want me to braid your hair for bed? I did see that you had braided your hair when you returned from the mission, so if you want to do it yourself, I wouldn’t mind,” Shen Yuan says as they enter their room, the *thunk, thunk* of the crutch loud in it. Ugh, he can’t *wait* for it to be gone. Sure, Mu Qingfang had talked about physical therapy and all that, but it will be so damn nice to not sound like a pirate with a peg leg everywhere he goes.

“I don’t know what Yuan is talking about,” Binghe says, accepting the crutch when Shen Yuan hands it to him, putting it to the side, “I’ve absolutely no idea how to braid anything at all.”

“Those were *not* the braids I put in your hair!”

“Maybe the knowledge leaves me when I’m back at the sect,” Binghe says, looking utterly serious if one were to ignore how his dark eyes sparkle with mischief, “it’s a very big mystery. Until we solve it, this Shidi humbly begs Shixiong for assistance.”

“I know Binghe can lie better than that,” he says, but can’t help but grin as he accepts the brush pressed into his hands, “I’ve *seen* you lie better than that.”

“Yuan knows me very well,” Binghe agrees, sitting down in his night robes, shuffling until he is in position for braiding. Shen Yuan can’t help but tug lightly at his hair and watch the curls bounce up when let go.

“You are my best friend. Of course I know Binghe best.”

“Mn.”

Aw, his ears are all red. Shen Yuan bites back a laugh and begins to carefully brush through the thick hair. A comfortable silence falls as he works, five days not long enough for him to forget how to do it.

He never thought he would *like* to handle someone’s hair. Not after Lady Jia. But Binghe’s hair is thick and curly where Lady Jia’s was smooth as silk. Perhaps that is why.

Shen Yuan likes how thick the braid gets, the challenge of getting it all properly tucked away for bed. He pokes at Binghe’s nape, the soft hair too short to be braided, and giggles when it makes his friend jump.

“Why are your hands as cold as your feet?” Binghe complains, though he still lets Shen Yuan tuck said cold feet against him when they curl up under the blanket.

“Maybe it is Binghe that runs hot,” Shen Yuan replies, “maybe I’m perfectly normal.” He certainly *feels* warm, one arm around Binghe.

They should probably sleep in different beds. Mu Qingfang had reminded him to keep working on sleeping alone, after all.

But it’s Binghe’s first night back home.

Shen Yuan feels Binghe yawn against his shoulder, warm breath against thin fabric. He smiles and listens as Binghe slowly drifts off, until his own eyelids grow too heavy to stay open.

He will sleep in the other bed tomorrow, he drowsily thinks.

But tonight, it’s fine.

Because he missed Binghe.

Chapter End Notes

MQF: this child has anxiety and a strong desire to feel useful... ah! I know what will help. A pet project.
Lin Jie: *exists in all his rabid glory*
MQF: Perfect.

WQW, that evening: hello-! where is the child
MQF: his friend returned, so he is sleeping back at Qing Jing.
WQW: :(
MQF: *pats his hand* it's alright, he will visit again.

HAPPY NEW YEARS!!!!!
If I managed to stay awake until then, I hope I managed my goal to upload this chapter right at midnight! So this will hopefully be an early surprise <3
And also I would be very cool for it. I never managed to stay up until then! I sleep right through all the fireworks, it's crazy.

My new year's resolution is to complete a collection this year :D
Probably a book collection. I should probably specify but... it's a HAPPY new year's resolution so the rules are loose by design <3
(the other one is to learn how to embroider!)

I hope this fic makes your day better if it wasn't! I'm so grateful for all the love and support, and I hope that comes pouring right back to you! Here is to making the next year better than the last, bit by bit <3

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the third day back from the mission, it rains.

It does not often rain at Cang Qiong Mountain; or, at least, it rarely rains at Qing Jing Peak. Shen Yuan once said it was because they had so much mist instead. That all the rain traveled down towards the farmer's peak, which truly was what he preferred. He had said that walking on the slippery stone stairs of Qing Jing was already hell on earth during winter, and he would rather avoid doing it in all the other seasons as well, because with his luck he would slip and fall and die face first in a mud puddle.

Luo Binghe is not certain how much of that holds weight, nor where the logic is. But rain does rarely fall, and they often have mist.

(and Yuan is clumsy enough for that, though Binghe hopes he would be there to catch him before such a thing happened. But just in case, he has been sworn to lie at his funeral)

The rain that arrives on the third day of his return is the type of rain that soaks one to the very bone. It is not a torrent, but the kind of drizzle that lures one into a false sense of security. *It is only a little,* he sees the older disciples argue, *there is no need for an umbrella. It only just began to rain and will surely stop as quickly as it began.*

Luo Binghe knows better.

The rain pitter-patter softly against the umbrella as he leaves the training grounds, his nose once again steering him right in preparation, and he ignores the looks from the other disciples for it. Shen Yuan had teased him for it that morning, the way Luo Binghe had insisted on bringing an umbrella to each class when the sun shone brightly in the sky, mere wisps of clouds visible. *'I only trust grandpas to smell the rain,'* he had teased, *'Binghe's nose isn't old enough!'*

The umbrella is a plain one, once white but now turning paper-yellow from use. It is a standard one allowed for all to borrow, but few rarely do. Most of the members of Qing Jing Peak are from families of wealth. They usually have their own umbrellas, the kind that have art sprawling across it, made by someone who is paid for such things.

Perhaps, once he has time, he could try to paint on it himself. Or maybe he can ask Shen Yuan to do it, if he grows tired of reading.

The rain has grown heavier by the time he reaches the library, his boots dark from stepping through shallow puddles. But he doesn't need to worry about whether he will be allowed into the library with them; for once, Shen Yuan is waiting by the entrance, glaring out at the dark sky with the kind of judgment he tends to save for Ming Fan when the guy scolds them for a

bit too long.

“Hi Yuan,” Luo Binghe greets, and watches as the glare melts into a smile, as his best friend stands up straight.

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan says, relief in his voice as Luo Binghe steps closer, tilting the umbrella so that he can step out from his shelter and take his spot by Luo Binghe’s side instead, “right on time! How did you know?”

“I told you this morning, didn’t I?”

“Oh, don’t say *I told you so,”* Shen Yuan groans, but he still shuffles closer, crutch in one hand, bag of books in the other. Luo Binghe decides to free him of that burden, at least. His friend doesn’t fight it, and so Luo Binghe adjusts his grip on the umbrella as he shoulders the bag over his free shoulder.

Shen Yuan really should be the stronger one out of the two of them; the bag is *heavy,* and it makes him wonder if Shen Yuan smuggled in *more* books that morning. It wouldn’t be the first time, though how the other boy has been able to balance it all as they went from lesson to lesson, he doesn’t know. The crutch makes things unwieldy.

“I’m not saying anything,” Binghe replies, and then squirms and laughs as Shen Yuan pokes him in the side for it, “Don’t! I’m the one holding the umbrella,” he protests, “you will get wet!”

“So stand still then!”

“Not if you’re going to *poke me,”* Luo Binghe protests, and winces when Shen Yuan instead pinches him, which results in him jerking away just enough to expose Shen Yuan to the downpour.

Shen Yuan *squeaks* and is instantly glued to Binghe’s side instead, hair already wet and sticking to his face even from that short moment. Luo Binghe bites back a laugh as Shen Yuan grumbles.

“Not a word.”

“Not a single one,” Luo Binghe agrees.

They both exchange a glance, and immediately start giggling.

The walk to the bamboo house is slow but not unpleasant. Shen Yuan often has to grab onto Luo Binghe’s arm, the stairs too slippery even with the crutch, but that is alright. They talk about the sword lesson which Shen Yuan missed, about the research on minor injuries Shen Yuan has done. They discuss Ning Yingying, who is needling them both to accompany her more.

“I think A-Ying misses Shizun,” Shen Yuan says as the door closes behind them, the

umbrella put to dry outside by the door. He gestures at himself, hair instantly going dry with a puff of qi, something that Luo Binghe knows even older disciples struggle to do. Often, people do it too weakly with little result, or too strongly and make a mess instead.

His Yuan is so talented.

“Even if she does, she knows Yuan can’t keep up with her right now,” Luo Binghe points out, “if she wishes to have company, she must learn how to sit still enough for it and not try to drag you all over the peak.”

“Binghe could be with her. I don’t *have* to be there with you both, you know. I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Does Yuan want tea?” Luo Binghe asks, choosing to not mention that he feels no such desire. Ning Yingying is a good friend, more so now when she has begun to respect the distance which Yuan likes to keep from her. But if there is a choice, then Binghe will spend his time with Shen Yuan first and foremost.

He fills the tea pot with water and considers what leaves to use, which cups that Shen Yuan would prefer- only to realize that Shen Yuan hasn’t replied to the question.

“Yuan?” he asks, and peeks out of the kitchen, expecting to see his friend reading a book, deaf to the world and smiling.

Instead Shen Yuan is staring at Shen Qingqiu’s desk.

Neither of them have touched it since the man left for the caves; not more than to ensure no dust gathers. It looks empty, free of its normal clutter of scrolls and ink and lingering tea cups.

Shen Yuan stares at it with an expression that Luo Binghe instantly dislikes.

“Do you… does Binghe think we can send letters?” Shen Yuan asks, fingers idly tapping at the table he sits by, not loud enough to make any sounds, “to the caves?”

Luo Binghe watches him for a moment. Shen Yuan does not look back, in such a way that says he is intentionally avoiding it. The tapping grows faster, nails against wood just loud enough to make sounds now. He looks oddly small, the way he sits.

“I don’t think so,” Luo Binghe says and tries to do it as gently as he knows how when it makes his friend droop like a wilted flower, “it is supposed to be a seclusion, is it not?”

“Right. Yeah, of course,” Shen Yuan says and drags his gaze away from the empty desk. He still refuses to look at Luo Binghe, instead reaching into his bag to pull out a book, “I knew that.”

“... Yuan-”

“I would love some tea,” Shen Yuan blurts out, and his green eyes are pleading when they finally make contact, his smile wobbly around the corners, “please?”

Binghe holds that gaze for a moment, before he sighs and gives a nod.

“I’ll prepare it,” he says, and pretends he doesn’t see how Shen Yuan slumps with relief, “there are some melon seeds left as well, I’ll bring those too. Is there a tea you would prefer?”

“Binghe can choose,” is the reply, and Luo Binghe nods.

He busies himself with making sure the kitchen is tidy. It is simple and spare, and he knows he does not need to pay so much attention to it. It is used to being neglected, Shen Qingqiu never using it for more than tea himself. But it is calming, wiping down counters. Making sure everything is sorted by color and size and taking a small delight in possibly messing up what organization Shen Qingqiu may have had.

Luo Binghe does not understand why Shen Yuan is like this.

Perhaps it is the flaw of that kindness he himself so often relies on. Or maybe it is Binghe that is the problem, because he knows he can be petty and jealous, just like how he knows Zhu Kang must be nice but Binghe was Yuan’s friend *first.*

But Shen Qingqiu isn’t someone that he thinks Shen Yuan should worry about.

Shen Qingqiu who still refuses to claim Shen Yuan as his own; who did not offer a helping hand during that awful first year. Who made sure that Luo Binghe *knew* that Shen Qingqiu knew what was happening to Shen Yuan, knew all about how Luo Binghe was sent off on useless tasks just to give Zhao De and his minions more time to hurt Yuan.

And did nothing.

“I will not go out of my way to help a child that should know better,” Shen Qingqiu had said, as if Shen Yuan wasn’t stubborn and clever and wonderful, as if just because Shen Yuan didn't resort to violence, it made him unworthy of receiving help.

Shen Qingqiu doesn’t deserve the peace that Shen Yuan managed to shape between them, the tea drinking they shared every evening. But Shen Yuan is too kind, too forgiving and seemingly unable to hold any real grudges. He even forgave *Ming Fan.* If they saw more of Cui Wenyan, he might have forgiven him as well.

Luo Binghe holds a green cup in his hand, mottled with darker shades and rimmed with bronze-brown. It is the one he has most often seen Shen Qingqiu drink from. It must be his favorite.

Shen Yuan doesn’t need to hold grudges, he decides.

Binghe can hold them for him.

A week passes and Luo Binghe stays.

This is great; a Binghe who stays means that there is one less bored Shen Yuan. As he himself *is* Shen Yuan, he thinks this is a very good trade. Being bored fucking sucks and even Ning Yingying can only sneak away from so many lessons before she gets punished for it.

It's only that it also makes Shen Yuan nervous.

He knows that Shen Qingqiu wanted Binghe out on as many missions as possible; and he *knows* there are many available. He has seen people come and go, disciples and masters alike. He has seen Ming Fan nag people into accepting missions they have tried to squirm their way out of.

But Binghe is still there.

It feels a bit like waiting for an anvil to fall from great height. Shen Yuan *knows* he shouldn't call attention to it. If he does, it might change and Binghe will be sent out the very same day. But also it keeps building, the dread of it. When will Binghe suddenly leave? When will the anvil drop and leave Shen Yuan looking like an idiot? Eventually, after Ming Fan once again very pointedly doesn't look at them when he hands out a mission scroll, Shen Yuan can't help it.

"Why isn't Binghe out on any missions?" he blurts out, catching Ming Fan's sleeve in his hand and holding on to make sure that he can't escape, "why are you ignoring him?"

The older boy freezes.

Shen Yuan watches as Ming Fan turns a ruddy red. He resists the urge to poke at the white strands of hair at the back of Ming Fan's head when the older boy turns to scan the area around them.

They are alone, of course, the courtyard empty of disciples their age.

Shen Yuan wouldn't ask where Binghe can *hear*.

"Aren't you happy that he is still here?" Ming Fan hisses once he knows the coast is clear, scowling at Shen Yuan. If this was two years ago, it would probably be scarier.

These days, Shen Yuan is a bit too tall to think much of it.

And also Ming Fan is wearing the ribbon he gave him. It really removes any kind of chance

Ming Fan had at intimidating him.

“Of course I am,” Shen Yuan protests, ignoring how Ming Fan tries to tug his sleeve free from him, “but I also know what Shizun wanted! And you *always* do what Shizun says, don’t you?”

“Wha- of course! This one greatly respects and admires Shizun, of course this one would do no such thing as *ignoring* his orders!”

“But Binghe is still here! And you don’t like him,” even though *everyone* should like Binghe, but some character traits are just hardwired into the NPC frame, he thinks. Not that Ming Fan is an NPC. But like… still.

Wait.

“Or do you?” Shen Yuan asks and squints at him.

“No,” Ming Fan says, acting like Shen Yuan just insulted his mother, finally yanking his sleeve free, “how *dare* shidi imply such a thing?!”

“This one wasn’t implying so much as asking,” he points out.

Ming Fan scoffs.

“If Shidi *must* know,” he says, smoothing out the wrinkled sleeve, grumbling, “this one has made the decision to wait *one* more week before this one sends out the little beast again.”

Oh.

Anvil dropped, he thinks, heart sinking.

“Don’t call him that,” Shen Yuan says, flexing his fingers. He is finally without the crutch, though still banned from most physical classes and still slow and stiff when he walks. But right now, he somehow finds himself *missing* the crutch. “But… but why did Dashixiong wait so long? If- if he doesn’t like Binghe, then…”

“Ugh,” Ming Fan huffs, crossing his arms, “it’s because of *you,* alright?”

Well that makes no sense.
Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

“What?”

“As long as *he* is here, you’re not everywhere else,” Ming Fan says, gesturing out towards the mountain peaks all around, the sun highlighting the shape of them with a golden glow, the sight still breathtaking even after years of living with it, “which means this one isn’t wasting time trying to find you! Because Shidi keeps missing lessons, going off and being- being poached.”

“That’s stupid,” Shen Yuan protests, balling up his sleeves, hiding his hands within them, “no one is poaching me. And is it even poaching if it’s within the sect?”

“One would think so,” Ming Fan says with a haunted look in his eyes.

So dramatic.

“Well, what if you don’t send Binghe out on missions? Then this Shidi will stay here all the time,” Shen Yuan says, “it’s not like Shizun needs to *know,* right?”

“Shizun always knows. He is very clever and insightful,” Ming Fan says and leans in to flick away a leaf from Shen Yuan’s shoulder, ignoring the way Shen Yuan tries to lean away from him in turn, “this one knows even if it is a year before Shizun returns, he will know if the beast stayed here for too long between missions. Two weeks is the *most* this one can allow.”

Shen Yuan thinks back to the teacup which Binghe accidentally broke a few days ago, tripping on Shen Yuan’s crutch and spilling dark green porcelain everywhere. They had tried to glue it back together with mixed results.

He winces.

“Is Shixiong sure?” he asks, feeling a bit like he is trying to retie the anvil and hoist it back up, or perhaps like he saw the fraying ends of a rope about to break and is doing a bad job of gluing it all back together, knowing it’s useless.

“Why are you *not* at lessons, anyway?”

“Um. It’s- it’s fighting class now, so…”

“So go and watch? Or practice your music,” Ming Fan huffs and Shen Yuan yelps as his wrist is grabbed and he is yanked into walking, wincing at the jarring movement, “just because Shizun isn’t here does *not* mean that Shidi can skip lessons. You can learn plenty just from watching! And maybe playing music while doing so is a good training method we haven’t tried, and also it is not called fighting class, is it sword or-”

Shen Yuan groans.

But he can’t do much else than let himself be dragged along.

Is he meant to be the one to get Lin Jie?

Shen Yuan can walk without crutches now, but he still isn't allowed to fly alone. Fu Yue hums with patience when he touches its pommel, but it still makes him feel bad. He has a flying sword and he has barely gotten to use it. Fu Yue with its endless patience deserves to be able to fly. To be used the way a sword is meant to be used in this kind of setting.

He hasn't even given it a tassel yet.

Should he ask for Zhu Kang's help to get Lin Jie over? Mu Qingfang? Both options seem bad; Mu Qingfang is *always* busy and Zhu Kang is the same, being a head disciple of Qian Cao Peak. Asking either to play taxi for a feral child seems a bit rude.

Shang Qinghua?

No, Shen Yuan hasn't heard much from the man since they last met. He could ask Binghe, but what if Binghe gets ambushed? Bai Zhan *hates* Qing Jing, after all. They would take one look at the green robes and kidnap him or something.

But it's not like Lin Jie will show up himself. The boy had really tried to bite *off* Shen Yuan's fingers, not just, like, bite at them. Shen Yuan still hasn't figured out how he will even make the boy sit still enough for a lesson, but he figured that's something he can tackle the day they meet.

… maybe… he could ask-

"How is Xiao-Yuan?"

Shen Yuan's scream is high pitched and abruptly cut short as he slaps a hand over his mouth. With burning cheeks, he slowly turns to look at the man who just spoke.

Yue Qingyuan smiles at him, gentle with a bit of a mischievous twinkle to his eye. It is subtle, and if Shen Yuan hadn't had brothers in a past life and a Binghe and a Ning Yingying in this one, he might never have noticed it. But he did and does, and so he knows that Yue Qingyuan found his scream very funny and is very politely not laughing.

It does not make him stop blushing.

"Gege," Shen Yuan says, muffled from behind his hand before he remembers and drops it, "this one greets. Um. This- hi. I didn't know you were back?" he says, accidentally making it a question.

Yue Qingyuan's smile widens; he sits down on the bench which Shen Yuan had been sitting on, staring off into the direction of Bai Zhan Peak. The bench is small enough that Yue Qingyuan's dark robes brush against his own.

"Hello," Yue Qingyuan warmly replies, "I returned this morning, and wished to ensure that Xiao-Yuan is well. Are you?"

“Yyyyyes?”

Yue Qingyuan begins to look a bit concerned.

“Is Xiao-Yuan certain?” he asks, and then grows softer, “it is fine if you are not. This one is aware that your Shizun is gone at the moment. Your home must feel empty.”

“I don’t miss him,” Shen Yuan protests, and decides to pretend it doesn’t sound like he is lying. Nope. He does *not* miss Shen Qingqiu! He’s just- concerned. What with the whole possible murder plot, no matter what Airplane said. It is still possible it will happen! And then the demon invasion will follow after, and Shen Yuan really does *not* want to meet Sha Hualing- “It’s fine! This one was just… um…”

He trails off, unsure on what to say.

Yue Qingyuan hums and turns his gaze towards the view. It is a nice view; Bai Zhan is barely visible, framed by the other peaks in the distance. The sun is not quite setting, but it is low enough that it gives Bai Zhan a golden halo, the sunlight glinting against rooftops even from so far away.

“Xiao-Jiu has a large presence,” Yue Qingyuan says.

Shen Yuan peeks up at him; the man is still looking towards Bai Zhan, his gaze distant and his smile nostalgic. He does have a nice face. A trustworthy one, the type of face that is made for soft smiles and reassurance. But as Shen Yuan looks at him, he also thinks that Yue Qingyuan looks tired.

It is not very obvious. But there’s a strain at the corner of his eyes.

“And he may not always be the most pleasant,” Yue Qingyuan continues, dark eyes meeting Shen Yuan’s, smile widening as Shen Yuan feels his cheeks flush once more at being caught, “but it is difficult to not miss it when it is gone, yes?”

“... I guess,” he mumbles.

He can’t deny that Shen Qingqiu has a presence. He can’t deny that the bamboo house feels empty when Binghe isn’t there to distract. The desk looks too bare, the fans look neglected. He has let his fingers brush against them more than once, but never dared to pick one up.

Shen Yuan doesn’t miss Shen Qingqiu.

He’s just… not used to not seeing him around. That’s all.

“Gege,” he says, looking down at Fu Yue in his lap, tracing the scabbard, then up to the pommel and the moon designs in the hilt, “Shizun won’t- that is- Liu Qingge is in the caves too, isn’t he?”

“He is. But… Ling Xi is large,” Yue Qingyuan says, voice careful and even, “even if there

were more within those caves, if one picks the right one, no sound will escape. Liu-shidi takes cultivation seriously, as does Xiao-Jiu. This one trusts them to not argue during such a delicate process."

Shen Yuan grimaces.

"What if they both want the same cave?"

"Xiao-Jiu has a favorite," Yue Qingyuan says, and he sounds distant. Not in a good way. "As does Liu-shidi. If they follow old habits, then it should not be much trouble."

"Alright," Shen Yuan says, and Yue Qingyuan simply *sits* there for a while, watching the mountain peaks all around them as if they are not even there.

Shen Yuan reaches over and grabs his hand.

"Gege," he says, and Yue Qingyuan blinks, clarity returning before he turns towards Shen Yuan with a questioning *hmm?,* "Gege," Shen Yuan repeats, "next time Binghe must leave for a mission. Could I visit you?"

Yue Qingyuan's smile grows bright.

"Xiao-Yuan is always welcome," he says, and Shen Yuan smiles back.

In two days, Binghe is meant to leave on his next mission.

This time he will be accompanying three adults and Cui Wenyan, which is- something. Shen Yuan isn't sure if that's good or bad, and he rereads the scroll which Ming Fan had thrown at Binghe that morning, trying to figure out if the mission will be tougher than it says. But no, it looks simple, despite the need for three masters and one Cui Wenyan. And, of course, one Binghe.

"Why is A-Yuan frowning so much?" Ning Yingying asks, dipping her fingers into the pond, letting the fish swim up to her. Binghe is sitting next to Shen Yuan, polishing Zheng Yang, the blade glinting in the sun.

The three of them are by the pavilion that is, perhaps, Shen Yuan's third favorite place after the tree and the library. It might be where Liu Qingge once kicked Binghe in the face, but it *also* has beautiful ponds surrounding it. Lily pads with pale pink flowers dot around it, and in between all the green there are flashes of colorful fish and the occasional frog. He especially likes the pond skaters brave enough to linger on the water surface. They are bright blue and

green, nothing at all like the brown ones he remembers of a past life.

Proud Immortal Demon Way knows how to make even the most unassuming bugs the flashiest.

“This one doesn’t understand why Binghe is being sent out on this,” he says, “or- well, of course this one does, but this one doesn’t understand why *three* masters are coming as well! It’s just flower gathering, not even one of the dangerous ones or- or weird ones.”

“Shizun told this one once that sometimes, people are lazy and like to take missions that will let them do more fun things,” Ning Yingying says, wiggling her fingers when the fish nip at, “like gambling!”

The fuck? Shen Qingqiu would tell *Ning Yingying* those kinds of things??? Well, it probably wasn’t wrong.

“And they’re letting Binghe come along to *that!?”*

“It’s fine,” Binghe says, holding out Zheng Yang for inspection, “this one doesn’t mind, and this one doubts he will be allowed to join in on such, ah, activities. Besides, flower picking doesn’t seem that hard. Better than the fox spirit.”

“Yingying wishes she could’ve seen that,” the girl whines, “A-Luo is so lucky! This Shijie *also* wants to go on missions! Ming-shixiong is so mean, only giving them to A-Luo.”

“This one would happily switch if he could,” Binghe assures her and sheathes the sword, “is Yuan finished reading now?”

“Yes,” Shen Yuan says and leans away when Binghe reaches for the scroll, “well, almost. There has to be a catch, it can’t just be… you’ll be gone for *two weeks,* it makes no sense, I- this one should’ve brought those books with, the flowers must be mentioned in them!”

“Yuan,” Binghe says, laughter in his voice, “please do not run all the way back to the house just to get the books.”

“A-Yuan can’t run, his leg is still bad,” Ning Yingying points out, and Shen Yuan sticks his tongue out at her. She, of course, sticks hers out back at him.

And then she blinks and sits up straight, water dripping from her hand as she shields her eyes from the sun, squinting.

“What’s that?”

“Huh?”

Shen Yuan and Binghe copy her, squinting up against the bright blue sky and its blinding sun. Up above, there are white shapes. They almost look like birds at first with how they fly, darting here and there. But the movement is too specific, and he tilts his head.

“Oh,” he says, “they must be from Bai Zhan, right? They have the white uniforms.” He wasn’t sure *why.* Liu Qingge had worn dark blue over white that one time, but for the most part, Bai Zhan Peak stuck to white. Considering how they all behaved, he thought they should have considered black. Maybe red. To hide all the blood.

“Why are they flying so weird?” Ning Yingying asks.

“Why are they *here?”* Binghe asks, suspicious, and Shen Yuan abruptly remembers Zhu Kang mentioning how the disciples of Bai Zhan have begun to do more raids lately.

“Oh fuck,” he blurts out, and Ning Yingying bursts into giggles even as Luo Binghe sends him a scandalized look.

“Yuan!”

“Oh, as if you haven’t heard worse!” Shen Yuan defends himself, flushing, “it’s- whatever, we should warn the others, right? Isn’t- I mean, the raids, and Shizun isn’t here and they’re flying weird and Bai Zhan is *not* close to Qing Jing for them to just be passing by–”

“They’re getting closer,” Ning Yingying says, seeming more fascinated than worried. Figures; she is Shen Qingqiu’s favorite. Shen Yuan bets no one ever tried to fight her during these things, though then again there hasn’t been any since Shen Yuan and Binghe joined the sect.

However, Shen Yuan remembers what the original said, and he also remembers how vicious Lin Jie was, though Lin Jie couldn’t *possibly* have a sword yet so…

Luo Binghe jumps to his feet and helps Shen Yuan stand up, his leg tingling oddly from sitting down for so long. Now standing, they immediately spot another, smaller group of white uniforms doing a very bad job at sneaking through the nearby bamboo.

“They’re really not that stealthy, are they?” he says outloud, and then immediately wishes he hadn’t as they all whip their heads around to look at them.

Oh fuck.

“There he is!” one yells, and *what.*

They begin running right at them.

What!!! WHAT!!!!!!!!!!

“What!” he blurts out, and then, from further away, he hears the unmistakable screeching of Ming Fan’s voice.

“Raid!” the older boy yells as further away, the disciples on swords dive down like seagulls going for french fries or, if he wants to be nice, hawks going for sitting ducks, “raid is

happening!”

Shen Yuan wants to suggest they should run. But, well. Ning Yingying wasn’t wrong before- he really can’t run, and if he tried, Mu Qingfang would probably get very, very disappointed, which is one step worse than being brutally murdered. He’s sure of it.

So instead he stands awkwardly, wondering if he should unsheathe Fu Yue. Would that be overkill? It’s not like he could do much, unless he used qi and sword signs, but as the Bai Zhan disciples come closer, he sees that most of them don’t even have swords and suddenly it feels like it would be cheating to use his own.

But also *they* are the ones attacking!?

“Back off!” Ning Yingying yells, and then she and Binghe are in front of him, not unsheathing their swords but falling into stances he recognizes from hand-to-hand classes, which answers that question. No swords allowed!

This is so embarrassing, he thinks despairingly, and then the fight is upon them and Binghe gets kicked in the face.

Chapter End Notes

MF: oh, what a nice day. I don't have to chase down any Shidis, our newest Shimei is making great progress at her reading and everything is just! Perfect! I sure hope nothing ruins this peaceful atmosphere as I go to take my lunch break.
Bai Zhan Disciples: *rubbing their grubby paws together* that WOULD be a shame, yes.

Update time :D
Be safe and healthy out there! Diseases be running rampant, and my immune system is not equipped for such things <_<

Thank you as always for all your lovely comments and for reading <3

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are rules to a raid.

As chaos erupts across Qing Jing Peak, that is what Ming Fan reminds himself as he dives out of the way of a punch. All of his fellow disciples are scrambling; some are cowards who flee, and *those* he is going to tell Shizun about when he returns from the Ling Xi caves. Shameful!

No swords allowed, he then thinks, and only barely manages to block a kick from the guy who dove down from the sky and aimed for him. The bastard doesn't twist his ankle on the landing, which is just typical. Ming Fan aims a kick at it in hopes of fixing that.

The Bai Zhan disciple is just too fast for the hit to land.

No swords allowed, except for transport, Ming Fan amends, and then Heng He dives in and takes a punch to the face meant for Ming Fan's back. And then their newest Shimei, little Chen Xiaoling, tries to join in.

"Absolutely not!" Ming Fan says and scoops her up, because the Bai Zhan disciples do *not* care how little you are, they will still beat you up, he knows this for a fact- "this Shixiong forbids Shimei from fighting! Master, ah, please-"

Master Ling accepts the girl with a bored expression, and seats Chen Xiaoling in her lap and holds her there, despite the squirming protests. And then Master Ling returns to her game of go, ignoring the sight of a Qing Jing disciple being thrown over her head.

Another rule; raids are between disciples.

This is a rule that Qing Jing Peak most often ignores, because Shen Qingqiu disapproves of it. He takes their studies very seriously, and he does not hold back when the raids happen. After all, Bai Zhan *always* shows up at the worst times!

Ming Fan remembers that time the heathens dove into a calligraphy lesson. It had taken *weeks* to get the ink out of the classroom floor, and all the uniforms had been beyond saving. Shizun had, of course, punished every single one of the intruders.

He had also punished the disciples of Qing Jing Peak, because it truly was shameful to be taken so by surprise. Ming Fan prefers to avoid thinking about it, the memory still bringing back phantom pains.

A girl with reddish brown hair kicks Heng He in the gut. Girls are not that common to see among Bai Zhan, but sadly more common than on Qing Jing Peak. But girl or not, she does

not hesitate to kick Heng He again, even though he's still wheezing on the ground.

"Has anyone seen him?" another Bai Zhan heathen yells as Ming Fan throws a wooden bowl at her, distracting her long enough that he can grab Heng He and put some safe distance between them. His Shidi groans pitifully.

"Not yet!" another heathen returns, and Ming Fan scowls.

"Who are you looking for!?" He demands to know, and then squawks as he ducks to avoid Cui Wenyan's body being thrown at him. The guy is already unconscious. Typical! Where was the brawn he was so proud of!? If Zhao De-

Ming Fan shakes his head, and blocks a punch from some brat that looks to be fourteen at most, and then punches back. Hah! Even if they're from Bai Zhan, age comes first! The disrespect, to attack their seniors and expecting to win–!

Who else is idiotic enough to be a sparrow pecking a tiger?

"Where's Shen Yuan," he blurts out, and Heng He wheezes at his feet, struggling to sit up, "where are the brats!?"

"I saw them at the po-" Gong Shi begins to say.

"Don't say it so loudly!" Ming Fan yells, and then he grabs Heng He by the collar and forces him onto his feet, "distract these dogs! Come on, Shidi, we must find the brats!"

"DID YOU JUST CALL US DOGS?! QING JING SCUM!"

Ming Fan avoids a rock thrown at him, a rock!!! Rule breaking, surely!? And then hears it hit the go table behind him. As the old masters erupt in complaint about a ruined game, chastising the Bai Zhan disciple responsible for it, Ming Fan and Heng He make their escapes.

Qing Jing Peak only has so many ponds, and fewer still that the brats and Ning Yingying would visit. And *maybe* Ming Fan is assuming the worst, but last time he let down his guard, the brat nearly lost a leg and Shen Qingqiu was *so* disappointed. And Bai Zhan always hated Shizun; it's not difficult to see how they would decide to target his son.

Ming Fan and Heng He run down the stairs; in the distance, he can hear more fighting, as well as the sound of water splashing. By the time they both round the corner, Ming Fan finds out he was right.

He really does not like being right for once.

The two brats and Ning Yingying are surrounded by brats from Bai Zhan. They all seem to at least be around the same age, but that does not matter when they can outnumber the others seven to three, and on top of that they have been cornered into the shallow ends of the pond. It's a horrible mess, water and mud staining the stone path, lily pads scattered in green pieces

all over.

As Ming Fan and Heng He get closer, one of the bastards grabs hold of Ning Yingying's braids and pulls. Ming Fan nearly falls over in shock.

"Hey!" he yells, and picks up speed, "hey! Stop that!"

There is no time to think; they tackle right into the group, sending everyone and themselves into the water as they do. For a while, there is nothing but flailing limbs and clumsy attacks, feet getting tangled in the roots of lily pads and slipping in the soft mud when they try to punch each other. Some ghastly pale kid manages to land a punch on Shen Yuan, sending the boy flailing backwards with a loud splash.

"Fuck!"

"You're of Qing Jing Peak!" Ming Fan coughs and yanks Shen Yuan back onto his feet before he grabs the weird kid and throws him towards Heng He, "you must mind your language! Heng He-"

"On it! This one- ouch!" Heng He yelps and lets go of the brat that just *bit* him, like some feral idiot. Ming Fan thinks there's blood.

"Lin Jie! Don't bite- ow!"

"Yuan!"

There are seven Bai Zhan brats, but eventually, between the five of them now, they manage to chase them off. The Bai Zhan disciples look absolutely awful in their muddied, sopping wet robes, but they at least have just enough brains to scramble away. It took long enough that Ming Fan is pretty sure that the raid is almost over- he can't hear that much fighting from anywhere else, no matter how much he heightens his hearing. It was a hard-won victory; Bai Zhan kids never know when to quit, which is exactly why no swords are allowed.

Ming Fan makes sure his nose isn't actually broken, before he turns to look over the brats and Ning Yingying, who have crawled onto land and sprawled out onto the stone paths in miserable lumps. Luo Binghe definitely needs to get washed down- he's the one most covered in mud out of all of them, plus a split lip and what might become a massive black eye. Shen Yuan has scratches on his cheek, a bite wound on his hand- that ghastly brat!- but the one who *really* makes Ming Fan certain that Shen Qingqiu will return early to kill them all is Ning Yingying.

One braid is undone, one is askew and there is *a bloodied nose.* And what is clearly the beginning of bruises all over her! The boys also have them, of course, but it's *Ning Yingying.*

"Xiao-Shimei," he says and uses the ends of his sleeves to wipe away the blood, the poor girl looking like she might burst into tears at any moment with how scrunched up her face is, "is Xiao-Shimei alright? Does she need help to go to the healing rooms? Or perhaps Qian Cao Peak?"

“We’re hurt too!” Shen Yuan feebly protests, flopping one arm. The sleeve is wet enough it makes a sound when it lands back onto the stone.

“Did Shidi’s leg get worse again?” Heng He asks, and they all watch with bated breath as Shen Yuan slowly bends his leg once, twice, three times.

“... it’s fine,” he finally says.

They all exhale.

“My nose hurts,” Ning Yingying says, nasal and miserable, and Ming Fan helps her sit up. His own wrist twinges oddly- one of the Bai Zhan brats had tried to twist it and nearly managed, but Ming Fan is almost seventeen and they all looked less than fifteen, so. Obviously *that* failed miserably. Just because they study the four arts does not mean that Shen Qingqiu has let them slack off! Of course not!

“Those hellions,” he grumbles as he stands up and helps Ning Yingying up onto her own feet, “why can’t they act more like Liu Qingge? He would never do such a thing! What do they *teach* those brats back on Bai Zhan, this one can’t believe the nerve- to pull on a little girl’s hair!”

“This one is *fifteen,* Ming-shixiong.”

“Liu-shishu is the perfect example of a good Bai Zhan cultivator! Why can’t they be inspired by him instead of whatever trash they hang around!? Do they think Bai Zhan is only about throwing their fists around!?”

“Isn’t it…?”

“NO! Bai Zhan Peak is our defense! They are the noble warriors who will defend the entire sect!” Ming Fan explains and gestures towards the last remains of Bai Zhan disciples finally using their swords to fly away, “Shizun was right to say that these raids are a waste of time! Should they not practice for such things instead of this!? Ah, these were my favorite robes, too. And look! One of them cracked my jade,” Ming Fan says and holds up the charm.

Once a token hanging from his belt, gifted to him by his family, it is now cracked and scuffed.

“Maybe it’s not such good quality jade after all,” Shen Yuan mutters, his hand held captive by the little beast, who seems to be inspecting it.

Ming Fan puts his hands on his hips.

“The disrespect! Shidi! Be grateful that your seniors came to rescue you! Shen-shidi should kowtow out of gratitude, not *backtalk.”*

“Yes, Shixiong,” Shen Yuan says, utterly insincere.

Brat.

Shen Yuan pokes at his hand.

The bite is a bit swollen, but not too bad. He has been able to figure out how to quicken his own healing with the help of Mu Qingfang, when Shen Yuan still spent the nights there. So there is no more bleeding, no more open wounds. It looks horribly bruised and swollen, but it still looks like it's healing. The books has informed him that sometimes things can appear worse as they heal, rather than better. So he's pretty sure he's doing it right.

But still.

To think Lin Jie would actually *bite* him. Breaking the skin kinda bite! Just… the fuck??? Is the boy actually full on feral? He can't remember if rabies exists in *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* Should he be worried?

"How am I supposed to teach Lin Jie how to read? Or write?"

"Perhaps you shouldn't," Binghe says from where he is on the floor, packing his bag. It is the night before he must leave, and Shen Yuan keeps having the urge to grab the bag and hide it. It's been *two weeks.* It feels illegal, packing that bag.

"Mu-shishu asked me to," Shen Yuan points out and looks away from the neatly folded clothes being carefully tucked away. His hand is more interesting to look at, anyway. It has to be. "I just… have to figure out how to do it, that is all."

"Shishu should understand that Yuan can't," Luo Binghe stubbornly replies. He has been grumpy ever since the raid happened; it may have been cut short because some of Bai Zhan ruined some kind of game between the elderly masters, but it still happened. They still got their asses kicked by them, they still had to be saved (ugh) by Ming Fan and Heng He.

Shen Yuan can still taste the pond water on his tongue.

Defeat tastes gross.

"Since Yuan can't go to Bai Zhan, and you can't get the brat to come here-"

"You sound like Ming Fan."

Binghe sends him a look; the kick to his face left him a nasty black eye, plus the split lip.

Shen Yuan has tried to lessen it but, well. They really nailed him. For shame! That's the protagonist's face??? Even Binghe struggles to make a black eye look good. Now, though, it really helps to highlight the disappointment on Binghe's face.

"Yuan."

"What? You do!"

"Ming Fan calls *everyone* a brat," Binghe protests, getting back up on his feet. His hair is unbound; thick and curly, newly brushed. Shen Yuan wants to push it away from Binghe's face when it briefly gets in the way as Binghe shakes his head, "I'm only calling the boy who *bit you* a brat. This one believes it is much more suitable, and this humble one is very hurt that Shixiong would compare him to *Ming Fan."*

Shen Yuan huffs a laugh, but he shuffles aside, lifting the blanket for Binghe to get under.

"Maybe I would be nicer to Binghe if he stopped calling me Shixiong," he says, and flops down onto the bed, making sure to slide a cold foot against Binghe's ankle. "Also, Ming Fan isn't that bad anymore."

"He is sending me away tomorrow," Luo Binghe mumbles.

Shen Yuan's heart twinges. He reaches up and smoothes down Binghe's hair. He should braid it. Those curls will somehow end up in his mouth sometime during the night if he doesn't. But sitting up feels like such an effort. More so when they lay so close that Shen Yuan can feel the warmth from Binghe's body.

"... I wish I could come with," he replies.

He knows he said it last time as well.
Shen Yuan suspects he might say it every time.

"I don't want to leave Yuan here," Binghe says, cheek squishing against the pillow as their eyes meet, "what if they do another raid? I can't protect you if I'm not here. And I- I just came back."

It's not fair, goes unsaid between them.

"I'm going to stay with Shibo when you're not here. And Mu-shishu," Shen Yuan says, "and maybe they will go for someone else next time there's a raid."

Luo Binghe does not look very convinced.

"If you find any interesting plants, that are *not* harmful may I add, could you bring some back?" Shen Yuan wonders, grasping for a distraction. "Since you're going to be flower picking for two weeks, anyway."

"Won't they have withered by then?"

“I have a book on plants,” Shen Yuan says, “you could press them between the pages! Useful *and* informative.”

Binghe smiles and wraps an arm around him. Shen Yuan shuffles closer, wrapping his arm around Binghe in turn, tucking his feet in between Binghe’s ankles. He grins against the other’s shoulder at the huff he receives for that.

“Only if Yuan won’t miss it.”

“I won’t,” he promises.

He won’t miss it as much as he will miss Binghe, anyway.

The next day, Ning Yingying accuses him of moping.

It wouldn’t be the worst thing she has accused him of, if not for *how* she said it.

“A-Yuan is moping like he’s a princess about to be married off to someone else, when what A-Yuan *really* wants to do is to marry his guard,” Ning Yingying says as they walk towards the courtyard for more sword lessons, trailing behind the rest of the disciples due to Shen Yuan’s stupid leg which won’t even let him join the stupid lesson to begin with, *ugh,* “but then the guard was relocated to the frontlines because your illicit love affair was gossiped about in court.”

“Is A-Ying still sharing books with the girls from Xian Shu?” he demands to know, cheeks burning, “this one is *not* moping! Not like that! Besides, doesn’t A-Ying also hope for Binghe’s safe return?”

“A-Luo went flower picking,” Ning Yingying says, waving it off like that’s not concerning at all in this world of freaky, magical flowers. “This one has no worries. But A-Yuan kept *sighing* the entire day.”

He did not!

“Is little Shen missing his friend?” Wei Qingwei asks, startling them both.

Shen Yuan does not want to find out whose scream was higher pitched, nor who grabbed the other tighter. They let go of each other as quickly as they grabbed on.

“S-Shishu!” he stutters, whirling around with Ning Yingying to face the newcomer, “this one

greets… Shishu…?”

Ning Yingying and Shen Yuan paused to take in the sight before them. There is Wei Qingwei in his black and red robes, his graying curls tied into a thick braid unlike the normal ponytail. There he is, on his hovering sword, smiling with dimples visible and looking perfectly at ease with the world.

And there, tucked under one arm, is a squirming Lin Jie.

The boy’s hair is hanging freely. It still looks uneven and chopped in places, the way Shen Yuan vaguely remembers looking after he let his little sister come at him with scissors to practice being a hairdresser. The boy is also covered in bruises- new ones overlapping old ones- and his face is an alarming shade of angry red as he struggles for freedom.

“Lin Jie?” he asks, “why are- is Shishu here to drop off Lin Jie?”

“This master can see how that would seem to be the case,” Wei Qingwei replies, “but this one is actually here to escort Xiao-Shen to our home.”

Shen Yuan looks away from where Lin Jie is trying to chew at Wei Qingwei’s wrist, with mixed results thanks to the bracer protecting said wrist, and blinks up at the Wan Jian Peak Lord.

“Oh,” Ning Yingying says, “Yingying forgot. A-Yuan is allowed to have sleepovers when A-Luo isn’t here.”

The way she says it seems a bit off; Shen Yuan glances at her, but she doesn’t look as off as she sounds. Instead, Ning Yingying is watching Lin Jie with what could be considered morbid fascination, her orange ribbons fluttering in the breeze as she leans in a little closer. Just out of range for an attempted swipe from the boy. It makes her giggle.

Shen Yuan inwardly shrugs and focuses back on the task at hand.

“But it’s not evening yet?” Shen Yuan points out and rubs his thumb against the lingering bite mark. It twinges. “Is Shishu certain that it is allowed…?”

And how did they even find out that Binghe was gone, when Binghe only had to leave that very morning? Did Ming Fan tell them? Did someone else? How fast does word travel between peaks? Shen Yuan had hoped to sneak a visit to An Ding Peak before anyone could track him down, having only seen Shang Qinghua at a distance these past two weeks.

And *why* was Lin Jie also here?

“A-Fang said you are meant to teach this one a few things,” is Wei Qingwei’s answer when Shen Yuan asks. His arm isn’t even *straining,* holding Lin Jie in place. Cultivator strength is terrifying, “and this master thought that Qian Cao Peak is a good, neutral place for such lessons.”

His smile is very amused, his dark eyes glittering as he glances down at the child under his arm. Lin Jie has been emitting a low, hissing kind of sound the entire time. Like a tea kettle before it screams.

“Bai Zhan can’t accuse Wan Jian or Qing Jing of kidnapping if it all takes place at Qian Cao,” Wei Qingwei says, “now, would Xiao-Shen join on this master’s sword, or would he prefer to fly on his own?”

“A-Yuan’s leg is still too bad for *that,”* Ning Yingying says before Shen Yuan can even open his mouth, “he can’t even run without tripping yet! Though that was also very normal even *before* he hurt himself,” Ning Yingying adds, giggling. “A-Yuan is so clumsy!”

Sometimes, she just *says* things. Normally, Shen Yuan turns his head away so that no one can see him trying not to laugh when she just drops a rude bomb on people, knowing that no one can say shit without risking Shen Qingqiu’s wrath.

This time, it’s aimed at him. He does not care for it, not today. Not in front of *Wei Qingwei,* with all his- his tattoos.

“This one would be honored to join Shishu,” he says, pointedly not even looking at her as he steps closer, “if it is allowed.”

(+5 F-points!)

However, before he can step onto the sword, Ning Yingying grabs his wrist. He twitches, not prepared for it as she tugs him back one step to pout up at him.

“Ming-shixiong will be upset,” Ning Yingying says.

“It’s only sword lessons left,” Shen Yuan replies, and waits for his skin to crawl. But Ning Yingying’s hand is just a little warmer than his. The grip isn’t bruising, there are no nails digging into his skin.

It’s just… a touch.

Shen Yuan blinks down at her hand, and then back at her.

“Shijie,” he says, “this one can’t do anything but watch everyone else practice. Is it not better to do what Mu-shishu asked this one to do?”

Ning Yingying wrinkles her nose.

“A-Yuan will return tomorrow?” she asks, “so that Ming-shixiong won’t be so grumpy again?”

“This one will return tomorrow morning,” Shen Yuan promises, and Ning Yingying’s brown eyes stare intently back at him.

Finally, she huffs and lets him go.

“Then this Shijie will tell Dashixiong that A-Yuan had to leave on Peak Lord business,” she declares, and Wei Qingwei laughs.

“This master is very grateful,” he says with a grin.

How Shen Yuan survived the trip, he isn’t sure.

Standing behind and awkwardly holding onto Wei Qingwei’s belt while avoiding the clumsy kicks of Lin Jie was not an experience he wanted to repeat. But he, somehow, did indeed survive and didn’t fall to his death.

Thank fuck.

Now he sits in Mu Qingfang’s home, Wei Qingwei sitting nearby and sharpening every single hidden blade he owns. Paper, ink and brushes are laid out onto the round table, and Shen Yuan clears his throat.

Lin Jie sits next to him, hugging his knees and glaring daggers, the bruises only making his eyes seem sharper. Sitting on the same side is, perhaps, a risk. But it’s easier to teach people if you sit next to them- that way, Shen Yuan can demonstrate how to move the brush, how to prepare the ink.

Besides, Wei Qingwei is nearby.

Surely Mu Qingfang’s… *guy* won’t let Lin Jie kill him?? Shen Yuan is pretty sure that Mu Qingfang likes him too much for that, and with how grossly lovey-dovey those two are, Wei Qingwei wouldn’t survive even one night on the couch. So. He’s probably safe from having his throat ripped out by a feral child.

Not that Shen Yuan thinks the boy can do that. He is still scrawny, still tiny and his hair *has* been chopped at, something new from last time they saw each other. It was uneven back then too, but it’s distinctly *more* so now.

He hopes it was an accident.

“Would Shidi like to sit closer?” Shen Yuan asks.

Lin Jie makes a sound.

It's kind of growly, but more high-pitched. Shen Yuan bites his lip to avoid cooing or making some other stupid sound. It's just. He's cute??? He's cute! He's almost as tiny as Chen Xiaoling, which says a lot. He's pretty sure that Lin Jie is at least two years older than her.

"Can Shidi see from where he is sitting?" he tries.

Lin Jie's eyes narrow and his hands clench where they clutch at his legs. Shen Yuan eyes him for a moment.

"Does Shidi want this one to heal him?" he asks.

"Oh? Xiao-Shen knows how to do that now?" Wei Qingwei asks, tucking away another knife into whatever pocket dimension he has stored. Like, sure, qiankun pouches *are* canon, but with the amount of sharp things that Wei Qingwei has piled up next to him, Shen Yuan wonders if he has twenty of them sewn into his robes.

"This one has learned how to speed up healing for bruises," he says, "it's not much, this one can't fully heal them. But if Shidi wants, it would at least go faster?"

"Don't touch me."

"Alright," Shen Yuan agrees and picks up a brush, "but Shidi has to watch this one, okay? Otherwise, Shidi won't learn."

"I don't *want* to learn. I can't kill monsters with a *brush,"* the boy snaps, curling in on himself even more, until only his eyes are visible from behind his knees, "so it's useless! Fuck you."

"Actually," Shen Yuan says, "you *can* kill monsters with a brush. There's specialized talismans-"

"Pssht!"

"It's true! One can make things explode and everything with them! But Shidi doesn't know how to write well enough for that," Shen Yuan says, and offers an encouraging smile as those pale blue eyes narrow at him. "Not yet, anyway. Oh, but what if this one shows Shidi how to write his name? Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Paper can't explode," Lin Jie says, judgemental. Clearly he is questioning Mu Qingfang's decision to let a weirdo teach him shit, and is not at all interested in how to spell his own damn name.

That's fine. Shen Yuan puts the brush to the paper.

"It can," he says, "but that is not what this one is going to teach. Now, Shidi isn't wearing long sleeves, but if he was, he would need to hold it away like this one is, to avoid stains. Ink stains are very difficult to get rid off. And then when one put down the brush, one should move their hand like this–"

In the end, Shen Yuan isn't sure if the lesson was a success or not. On one hand, he didn't lose any fingers to the terrifying jaws of Lin Jie, nor did he get any new bruises or scratches.

There was a teacup casualty, though.

And Lin Jie had several times tried to crawl off the couch to sneak closer to Wei Qingwei's supply of weapons, only to be put back in his place by the Wan Jian Peak Lord himself every time. It had made the boy's mood worsen until that poor teacup had met its unfortunate demise.

The bowl of roasted nuts would have likely followed, but thankfully Lin Jie was a *hungry* feral boy and knew better than to throw food.

"Do they not feed their disciples on Bai Zhan Peak?" he asks Mu Qingfang that evening, trying to glue the teacup back together with mixed results.

"It is a matter of first come, first served, if this one remembers correctly," Mu Qingfang replies, eyes half-closed. Wei Qingwei is giving him a shoulder massage. Shen Yuan can't look their way without wanting to die.

Look, he and Binghe *always* help each other out! Massages are super important for training cultivators! But they are platonic bros, and it's clear that a married couple or- or whatever the fuck Mu Qingfang and Wei Qingwei are, they do it in like. A gay way. So.

He's just not going to look at them.

The poor teacup requires his full attention. He has an excuse.
Not that he needs one or anything.
It's just-

Wait.

Are they married? Shen Yuan doesn't know. He has never heard them call each other husband, has he? He stares intently down at the teacup, sticky and gross and smelling bad because ancient China glue is yellow and weird and Shen Yuan hates it. He wants to wipe his fingers clean, but he needs to hold the pieces together a little longer.

"And as Lin Jie is the youngest one, it is possible that he may not be able to get as much to eat," Mu Qingfang continues, and Shen Yuan pushes away the thoughts of gay marriage (is it even possible in this world?) and goes back to thinking about Lin Jie.

The boy had been so scrawny.

“Would it be alright, if I… if I fed him food? Here? Whenever there are lessons?” he asks, even though he’s not the best cook. Lady Jia never- she- there were people for cooking. Shen Yuan wasn’t one of them.

But he has seen Binghe cook in the kitchens several times. So he knows a little bit, he’s sure.

“If Shizhi wants to, he may,” Mu Qingfang replies.

“We don’t cook a lot here though,” Wei Qingwei points out, “most of our food is from the dinner halls. Xiao-Shen could simply ask them to deliver it here when you two arrive.”

“Oh, okay. This one will do that.”

“There is no need to be so formal with me, Xiao-Shen,” the man says, and finally Shen Yuan looks at them. Wei Qingwei’s dimples are on full display, his smile wide as Mu Qingfang’s head lolls to the side with a happy hum, “does this master not also live in this house? Surely A-Fang isn’t the only one deserving of informal treatment?”

Shen Yuan flushes bright red.

“Shishu isn’t- Wei-shishu isn’t *always* here,” he defends himself.

“It’s true,” Mu Qingfang agrees, “technically, this house does only belong to the Lord of Qian Cao Peak.”

“Is A-Fang kicking out his Wei-ge? Now? Ah, I don’t know how to take this heartbreak,” Wei Qingwei sighs dramatically, and then begins to brush out Mu Qingfang’s braids like a *freak,* all slow and- and sensual and-

Shen Yuan does *not* do it like that when he does Binghe’s hair! It feels like he’s looking at something not intended for younger audiences??? Hello??

“Don’t worry. This master will allow Wei-ge to remain,” Mu Qingfang says, amused, “though you *have* been here quite often lately. Will Wan Jian Peak survive?”

“This master is there during the day,” Wei Qingwei replies, fingers long and nimble, expertly weaving hair– and Shen Yuan forces himself to look back at the teacup and its sticky glue. “And how can I miss out on seeing our little Shen?”

Ours??? Ours what? Excuse???

“I’m not being poached, am I?” he asks suspiciously, remembering Ming Fan’s words. Was he actually right in his paranoia?

“Not by me,” Wei Qingwei laughs, “though this master *would* like to see Xiao-Shen’s sword work once he is allowed to do such things. How is Fu Yue?”

“Um. Good? This one has… that is, can swords feel neglected?” he wonders, looking towards where Fu Yue is resting by the couch. It truly is beautiful, even when sheathed. Shen Yuan wants to touch it, but the teacup continues to keep him stuck in place. “Since this one hasn’t been able to wield it lately, it’s just- I mean, is that alright? Can swords get upset about that?”

“Some might,” Wei Qingwei admits, “but Fu Yue seems to be a gentle and patient one. If a sword is upset, little Shen will notice. They are not subtle, these souls.”

Right, they had souls.

Where the fuck did those even come from? What *kind* of souls? Were they people once? Or something else? Nature spirits perhaps? Or-

“I do believe Shen Yuan can remove his hands from the teacup now,” Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan happily does just that. The teacup remains whole and his hand smells weird.

“I’m going to wash up,” he decides, holding his sticky, gross hands far away from himself as he hurries off to do so.

“I think he’s warming up to me,” Wei Qingwei says, and Shen Yuan blushes furiously as Mu Qingfang laughs.

It is strange how quickly a room can feel like a home.

Or perhaps that is not the right word. The guest room that Shen Yuan always ends up in isn’t home. But it is comfortable, and the wardrobe is still storing clothes he left behind last time. It still feels empty in comparison to the bamboo house- not only because of Binghe’s absence, but just the lack of clutter, the mess that always happens when people live in a small space.

So it’s not home. But it is safe.

Shen Yuan drags his fingers through his hair, feeling too twitchy for the comb and the possibility of its teeth dragging against his scalp. His own hands feel safer.

There is a knock on his door.

“Yuan-shizhi,” Mu Qingfang calls, “this one has prepared a calming tea for tonight. May I enter?”

“Yes, Shishu,” he replies, hurriedly removing his hands from his hair, instead letting them rest in his lap as Mu Qingfang enters.

The scent of the tea immediately fills the room; he can’t really identify it, but then again, there are so many different kinds of tea in this world. Most of them he never encountered before- a slave child had no way to get their hands on fancy things, and Lady Jia’s household had been rich, but not *that* rich. Some things, only cultivators have.

But even the scent is soothing.

He accepts the cup with a mumbled thanks.

“Sleep well, Shizhi,” Mu Qingfang says with a small smile, before turning to leave.

“Wait!” Shen Yuan blurts out.

The Qian Cao Peak Lord stops; he turns to give Shen Yuan his full attention, tucking his hands into his sleeves. For some reason, Shen Yuan didn’t expect that. Well, he should have. Mu Qingfang had always stopped to listen to him when asked to. But now he feels stupid, words stuck in his throat, hands warm where they cradle the cup of tea.

“... does Xiao-Yuan need something?” Mu Qingfang asks.

Not annoyed. Not condescending, or impatient.
Always calm, that Mu Qingfang. Shen Yuan wishes he could have that collected temper as well.

He can hear Wei Qingwei walk up the stairs, the door left open to Shen Yuans’ room, letting all the sounds in. He swallows.

“Does… does Shishu visit the Ling Xi caves?”

Mu Qingfang blinks, but his calm smile remains.

“At times, this one goes to ensure all is well,” he replies, “and I am in fact planning to do so in a week. Why is Xiao-Yuan asking?”

“Can- that is- um.” Shen Yuan’s face is burning. He looks down at the tea, an amber liquid that looks golden in the candle light. He taps a finger against the porcelain. It’s a simple white. “If Shishu meets Shizun… could, that is. I know he’s in seclusion? But- I mean, would it be alright to send a message? Or relay one? Maybe?”

“Hmm.”

Shen Yuan dares to take a peek; Mu Qingfang is still looking at him, but now thoughtful. His blind eye shimmers like a pearl, white and silver tinted, and Shen Yuan wonders once again if it would be rude to ask just *how* blind he is in that eye, or maybe how he injured it.

“I would normally say no,” Mu Qingfang finally says, and Shen Yuan sits up straight, “but most of the time, messages are prohibited so that the ones in the cave do not feel pressured to perform their sect duties. I assume that Shen Yuan has no such intentions?”

Shen Yuan shakes his head.

“No! No, of course not. I just… I guess- I don’t know.”

“You miss him,” Mu Qingfang says, and, uh.

Shen Yuan wants to say no, he does not miss Shen Qingqiu. Absolutely no way that he misses that rude, grouchy man whose face is too similar to Shen Yuan’s. No way!

But he can’t get the words out. All he feels is his face growing warmer, and all he manages is an awkward shrug.

“I would have to read the message to ensure it does not contain anything that might cause a qi deviation,” Mu Qingfang says, smiling in such a way that Shen Yuan wants to die from mortification, “and it will be a week before I go there. But if Xiao-Yuan writes an acceptable letter, this one would be happy to deliver it to Shen-shixiong.”

He can do that.

And this way, he will know if Liu Qingge has died yet. He can’t remember how early on it happened, if there is still a risk. And he *knows* that Airplane told him it would probably be fine, but. Surely writing an embarrassing letter is worth it? To know for sure?

“Thank you, Shishu,” he says, “I’ll do my best.”

“I know,” Mu Qingfang replies, still smiling so fondly at him, “sleep well, Xiao-Yuan.”

“Shishu too,” he says, and looks back down at the tea, “and- and tell Wei-shishu good night, as well.”

“I will do so.”

The door closes with a click.

Shen Yuan sips at the tea and feels his chest grow warm.

Chapter End Notes

WQW: I hope to one day make SY more comfortable around me.
MQF, who knows a crush when he sees one: I wouldn't expect it to happen anytime soon.
WQW: why :(
MQF: because it appears that the dislike of emotional honesty is genetic, and Xiao-Yuan shares more than a face with Shen-shixiong.

Look, Peak Lords are all cool, beautiful and powerful. Every single one of them have at least ten people who got crushes on them. Yes, even SQQ, but those poor things know better than to ever voice it out loud <_<;;

You can find me on tumblr under Grubus!

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Ling Xi caves are beautiful.

It is something which his sect siblings have often praised them for. The twisting turns are humbling, the beauty revealed within an otherworldly marvel. Poems have been written about the strangely shaped stones that cradle the green jade; how they are shaped like white clouds, sparkling in the candle light, the mere sight an inspiration and reminder of how far one can grow.

Yue Qingyuan does not let his gaze linger.

One hand rests on Xuan Su's pommel as he walks. His other hand does not hold a candle, but instead a night pearl. Cradled in the palm of his hand, perfectly smooth and round. The glow does not flicker; there are no haunting shadows cast against the cave walls as he walks. Only the soft sound of his robes swishing, the barest whisper of his boots against stone and the pale, white light in his palm lighting the way just enough for him to see.

Yue Qingyuan has been within the Ling Xi caves twice before in his life, but he will never forget the route to the cave that Shen Qingqiu favors.

At times, he wanders the same route in his dreams.

Yue Qingyuan wishes to drag his feet as they approach. Qi-ge wishes to walk faster, seeing the golden glow ahead. The goal is close, and in the end he is always Qi-ge when Xiao-Jiu is near.

Next to the entrance of the cave, there is a boulder. Yue Qingyuan moves his hand from Xuan Su to press it against the rock. It is smooth. He knows that the side which is turned against the wall is jagged and smeared with rusty red, but he does not think there is any other soul alive who knows about it. A little secret, he thinks with a wry smile, and moves into the cave with one last pat to the boulder before his hand returns to rest against Xuan Su.

"This one greets Shidi," he calls out as he takes that step, remembering the last time he met Xiao-Jiu within the Ling Xi caves. There had been a near-stabbing and fluctuating qi, eyes flashing furiously before Shen Qingqiu had turned away with a scowl. Yue Qingyuan half-expects his warning to go unheard, for there to be a repeat.

But this time, Shen Qingqiu merely turns his head and meets his eyes, before he scoffs and looks away once more.

"This one greets Zhangmen-shixiong," Shen Qingqiu cooly replies.

“May this one enter?”

“Why would this humble Shidi ever forbid Shixiong from doing so?” is the sarcastic reply, and Yue Qingyuan can feel his lips twitch upward, his heart grow fond. It is not permission, but he knows very well that Xiao-Jiu would tell him to *fuck off* if he truly wanted him gone.

Well, perhaps not in those words. Not anymore; Xiao-Jiu does not like to show their origins, and so if he were to tell Yue Qingyuan to leave, it would be with more filigree. In the shape of a knife.

“This one thanks Shidi,” he says and steps inside.

The walls are like they were the last time he was there. Jagged and horrible with its macabre art, and he cannot fully avoid looking at them. There, he remembers smashing his brow against the rock. Here, he clawed until his nails broke. And there–

Yue Qingyuan puts away the night pearl once he is close enough; Shen Qingqiu has lit candles within the cave, their glow warm and flickering. It is a good excuse to hide his own trembling hands into his sleeves.

Xiao-Jiu is dressed in white. Simple and plain, the clothes most commonly used within the Ling Xi caves. He knows that Liu Qingge prefers the same- and he should visit him as well, once he has finished speaking with Xiao-Jiu. But for now, Yue Qingyuan allows himself the time to watch Shen Qingqiu.

He sits straight, his black hair hanging like curtains of pure ink, long enough to pool against the rock which Shen Qingqiu sits on. From where Yue Qingyuan stands, he can see how the candles sculpt the shadows against pale skin. They make Shen Qingqiu’s face seem sharper and otherworldly, casting an ember tint to his green eyes. Like this, it’s difficult to compare him to Shen Yuan, or to even remember a time where they both sat on street corners, begging for coins with Xiao-Jiu’s skilled acting and Yue Qi’s less useful attempts, their cheeks smeared with dirt.

Like this, Shen Qingqiu looks like the Immortal he is.

Yue Qingyuan’s heart feels far too small for all the things he feels about it, but he knows to not voice a single one of those thoughts aloud.

“Why is Zhangmen-shixiong gifting this one with his presence?” Shen Qingqiu asks and does not look at him, green eyes staring stubbornly forward, “Surely he will enlighten this one. Or will this one be left in suspense?”

“This Shixiong is here to ensure all is well,” he replies, “and to relay a message.”

Narrowed jade turns to him, the blank face which Shen Qingqiu had been maintaining quickly giving way to suspicion.

“A message,” he echoes.

“Mu-shidi has told this one that Liu-shidi had a qi deviation?”

“The brute did lose control, yes. Hardly surprising, and months ago now.” Shen Qingqiu watches him suspiciously. “And Mu-shidi’s visit was weeks ago. Why would Zhangmen-shixiong ask about it when so much time has passed?”

Yue Qingyuan smiles.

“The message is not from Mu-shidi,” he admits, and watches as the suspicious confusion changes to resignation and something sharper.

“The brat.”

“Disciple Shen-”

Shen Qingqiu stands up in one sharp movement, abruptly towering above Yue Qingyuan as he turns to face him properly. Yue Qingyuan tilts his head back to meet Xiao-Jiu’s eyes, the pale face cast in shadow as his long, dark hair blocks it from the candle light. The way he stands, the way he leans in and over–

It has the very ends of his hair brush against Yue Qingyuan’s cheek in a silky caress. And then Shen Qingqiu stands straighter, hair slipping away, and Yue Qingyuan slowly breathes in and blinks.

“Surely Zhangmen-shixiong did not visit purely to relay a message from a *child?”* Shen Qingqiu hisses, glaring down at him. He pushes his hair over one shoulder, then rolls his eyes before Yue Qingyuan can reply. “Of course you did. Spoiling the brat will do no good,” he says and jumps down from the rock.

Yue Qingyuan turns to keep him within sight; he watches as Xiao-Jiu stalks over to the water within the cave, but does not follow. The water will be clean, he knows. Pure enough to drink from, still enough that it could act like a mirror.

Shen Qingqiu kneels by it and cups his hands to bring water to his mouth. There won’t be the taste of iron and dirt from hours of throwing himself at the walls, for Xiao-Jiu would not be so foolish as to try and fight a mountain with broken limbs.

Yue Qingyuan stays right where he is and keeps his gaze on Xiao-Jiu and not on the water he drinks from.

“It will only make him too soft. Softer than he already is,” Shen Qingqiu continues, and flicks his wet hands out to spray droplets against the pond, ripples breaking the smooth surface.

“This one is not only here because of the message,” Yue Qingyuan replies, “but this one will admit that he wished to ease disciple Shen’s worries about Xiao-Jiu.”

The slip earns him a sharp glance; Shen Qingqiu has been more forgiving the past year for such blunders, but their last meeting before this one had been… tense. Yue Qingyuan offers a smile in apology, and is quietly surprised when Shen Qingqiu only turns away.

“Does disciple Shen think he will receive a response to that childish letter by nagging? Surely our honorable sect leader has better things to do than to follow the whims of a child.”

The boy had not nagged. He had sulked, yes, and Yue Qingyuan had found it quite charming. Shen Yuan had spent the day before Mu Qingfang’s visit to the caves on Qiong Ding Peak, fretting over the letter he had spent so much time perfecting, and then he had spent the day after… sulking. He remembers how the boy had thrown himself onto the couch in Yue Qingyuan’s office in the careless, grumpy way only a slighted teen could manage as Mu Qingfang returned with no response, not even a verbal one.

Weeks had passed since then, and Shen Yuan had pressed his next message into Yue Qingyuan’s hands when he found out that he would be visiting the caves.

And as it had been the last day in which they would meet for some time, because Luo Binghe were to return that same day, Yue Qingyuan had not tried to deny the simple request.

He does not say all of that.

“Disciple Shen has been a good student,” Yue Qingyuan says instead as Shen Qingqiu tucks hair behind one ear before standing back up once more, every movement sharp with efficiency, “he has begun his sword lessons once more and has shown a talent for healing as well as qi manipulation. This one only thought he would do well with a reward.”

“Which was sending this master a message?” Shen Qingqiu asks, the way he would mock the other kids for being idiots, disbelief dancing around the edges.

Yue Qingyuan smiles and holds out the gift that Shen Yuan had pressed into his hands that morning, and he is glad that his hand is steady.

Xiao-Jiu looks confused for a moment, before he snatches the fan out of Yue Qingyuan’s hand.

“A fan? *That* is the message the brat sent? Zhangmen-shixiong did not even receive a letter?” he asks, unfolding the fan with a sneer, “he clearly did not craft the fan himself, so why-”

Shen Qingqiu’s words are cut off as he stares down at it.

“Xiao-Yuan painted it himself,” Yue Qingyuan says, and keeps his eyes on Shen Qingqiu’s face. He already knows what the fan is depicting, after all, and is curious about what Xiao-Jiu will think of it. Shen Yuan hadn’t wished to explain the artistic choice.

On the pale paper, there are smears of orange and black. Shen Yuan has a true talent for painting, Yue Qingyuan has come to realize, for what had seemed like angry jabs at the paper had taken on the form of a dark branch resting against an unseen surface, with orange

mandarins squashed next to it.

It's not something that Yue Qingyuan has ever seen depicted; but he thinks it's very personal and unique, the way the fruit has been painted with realistic smears of pulp scattered across it, how dark leaves stick to the fruit juice which Shen Yuan had carefully spread out from the squashed fruit in an oddly gruesome yet beautiful manner.

Shen Qingqiu stares down at it.

There is the tiniest twitch of his lips; there and gone, only seen by Yue Qingyuan who hadn't looked away. If he had, he would never have guessed that the cold mask settling over Xiao-Jiu's face was hiding an almost-smile. Yue Qingyuan's fingers curl inwards, away from the temptation of cradling that brief glimpse in his palm.

"Cheeky brat," Shen Qingqiu says, and snaps the fan closed.

"You did WHAT!?"

"Stay still!"

"Bro, you sent *the* Shen Qingqiu a fan of-"

"Dude," Shen Yuan hisses, "stop moving your face!"

"My face? You mean my mouth? My mouth that I need for talking about your insane beha– ow!" Shang Qinghua yelps and jerks away, rubbing at his cheek. "Why did you pinch me!?"

"I'm trying to heal your stupid face but you keep moving! Why wouldn't I pinch you?"

Shang Qinghua gestures at his cheek; the bruises that take up half of his face are blue and purple, the skin swollen. It makes him look incredibly disproportional. Especially with how one bruise is close enough to his eye to make it swell, just a bit.

"Because you're supposed to *heal* this? Not make it worse?"

"If I wanted to make it worse, I wouldn't tell you to shut up! Healing bruises is way harder than you think, okay, especially if it's someone else's. Moving your qi through foreign meridians is so weird, and I could end up making your stupid face even stupider."

Shen Yuan reaches out to put his hands back on the man's face, but Shang Qinghua leans out of reach before he can.

“For real?” Airplane asks.

“No,” Shen Yuan lies and pretends he doesn’t risk giving the man temporary facial paralysis if he fucks up, “now let me work.”

“You’re so fucking bossy for being fourteen,” Airplane complains. But he finally does as told, inching closer until Shen Yuan can press his hands to either side of his face.

“Twenty *and* fourteen,” Shen Yuan mutters.

They are in Shang Qinghua’s house, on the couch that had up until then been covered in paperwork. It had all been carefully moved to the floor to join other piles of paperwork.

Shang Qinghua is quite obviously behind on his duties.

But he has been gone a lot lately. Shen Yuan has done his best to catch him whenever he can, but half the time it has been when Binghe is there, and Binghe still has that weird hang-up about Shen Yuan being alone with Shang Qinghua. And obviously he can’t treat the man with Binghe right there, so.

But Binghe won’t be back until later in the day, and so Shen Yuan is here. Using the skills he has trained on himself to fix up the mess that is Shang Qinghua’s face.

“I still can’t believe you sent him a fan with art of crushed fruit. After you threw fruit at him- what, how long ago now?”

“More than a month or two,” Shen Yuan says, because he’s not supposed to keep track, not anymore, not after Binghe last time showed *Concern* about that, not after even Ning Yingying couldn’t remember how long Shen Qingqiu had been gone for, a month or two, three? Yue Qingyuan probably knew, but he didn’t want to ask the man about it. Shen Yuan focuses back on the task. “Now actually shut up. Was Mobei-Jun trying to punch you through a wall? Tell me if it starts itching.”

“You just told me to shut up and now-?”

“Shut up unless it itches, then!”

Shang Qinghua heaves a heavy sigh, but finally sits still. Shen Yuan narrows his focus down, until all he can see is the gentle flow of qi, needing to be redirected and strengthened, his own joining the flow to make it more efficient. There are more bruises, but they are hidden under clothes. Shang Qinghua is meant to attend a Peak Lord meeting in two days.

The face comes first.

Under his hands, he can feel the faintest hint of stubble. The skin under Shang Qinghua’s eyes is puffy with lack of sleep. Shen Yuan dares to smooth that out with a pulse of qi, knowing that Shang Qinghua won’t notice, because the fatigue still remains. He will only

look like he slept at least a little bit that week.

He pulls away and eyes the man.

The bruises already look better. Less blue, more green. The swelling is also down, and Shen Yuan breathes out. If he did everything right, they should be completely gone the next day. Shang Qinghua wrinkles his nose and scratches at his cheek.

“It’s itching now,” he says, “that’s bad, right?”

“No, it just means it’s working as it should,” Shen Yuan replies, and shakes his hands out, before he blinks. “By the way, what does it feel like? My qi, I mean?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, when- when Shen Qingqiu or Mu Qingfang does it, it feels very different between both of them, so mine must feel different too, right?”

Shang Qinghua shrugs and leans against the couch. He tugs his hair free from its bun, though it hardly makes a difference. Shang Qinghua has that distinct unkempt air about him, the one that tells Shen Yuan that the guy has been doing *a lot* of spy stuff lately.

Three years left to the Endless Abyss. Shen Yuan imagines it takes a lot of work to figure out how to cause a rift during a well-guarded event. One attended by cultivators, as well.

Shang Qinghua claims that Mobei-Jun only hit him once, and that he was unlucky and bumped into a wall after. That it had practically been a gentle smack by the future King’s standard, compared to last time.

Shen Yuan pulls his legs up and hugs his knees.

“Your qi feels kind of warm,” Shang Qinghua says and drags his fingers through his brown hair, untangling it, “and a little ticklish? I dunno dude, I wasn’t paying much attention.”

“Well, next time I want to know more details,” Shen Yuan replies and glances out the window. The sun is almost at its highest point. His stomach grumbles. “Ning Yingying wants to surprise Binghe, so I should hurry back.”

“At least you haven’t stolen her too,” Shang Qinghua mutters.

“Excuse me? I would *never* steal a wife from Binghe,” he protests, “and what do you mean *too?* I haven’t stolen anything from him, either! I’m his best friend? Hello?”

“I know what you are,” Shang Qinghua says, like an idiot trying to be cryptic. Shen Yuan re-considers healing his stupid face, then huffs.

“Whatever,” he says, “I’m going back before Binghe finds out I’ve been here. And you better be careful! I won’t be able to heal you again if- if that- that *minion* shows up.”

“Bro, show some respect to my King. But yeah,” Shang Qinghua says, but he also smiles, reaching forward to flick Shen Yuan’s nose, snickering when Shen Yuan swats him away, “I’ll be careful.”

Shen Yuan eyes him a moment longer.

Shang Qinghua still looks exhausted and bruised, and he is tempted to linger. To push some more qi into the man, to make the healing even faster. But he knows that might be bad; he’s not that good at healing yet, not enough to mend things so quickly. Even Mu Qingfang prefers to let natural healing take its time.

So instead Shen Yuan sighs and nods.

“Make sure to sleep too,” he adds, and grabs Fu Yue as he opens the door, “sleeping helps you heal faster, *Hua-shishu.”*

“Leave already!”

“Bye!”

With that, Shen Yuan unsheathes Fu Yue and *flies*.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* every wife had their own strength, or so Airplane had claimed. Most of them had been good at a specific *sexual act,* some weirder than others- Shen Yuan will never forget the slime princess of questionable origins, no matter how long ago he read that. It was traumatizing, alright? He couldn’t even look at green jello after.

Others were luckier; Liu Mingyan was known for her beauty and battle prowess, Sha Hualing was known for her temper and her demonic connections and Qin Wanyue had the honor of taking Luo Binghe’s virginity while also being known for butting heads with Sha Hualing in the harem dramas.

Ning Yingying was the forever supportive sweetheart.

She never once cooked food in the original, and as Shen Yuan stares down at their work, he understands why.

“There,” Ning Yingying proudly says, “it’s done! A-Yuan, he will *love* it.”

On the table, a modest spread of questionable food is laid out. There is rice that lay in clumps

of off-white, dumplings burned at the edges or which have split apart and spilled their contents. The vegetables are…

Very bad.

Okay, so maybe he can't blame *only* Ning Yingying. Maybe Shen Yuan also sucks at cooking. But at least he's not trying to act like Binghe will be happy with this disaster??? Binghe who cooks miracle food???? Binghe who can make congee taste like it was made in the heavens???

The rice looks *crunchy.*

"Sure," he says, "well, he should- Binghe should be on his way from the baths any moment now. So. We will- we will find out."

Ning Yingying beams a bright smile at him; it's a comfort. She's not been smiling as much lately, probably missing her future husband. Combine that with *puberty* and how Shen Yuan hasn't been spending much time on the Peak, and Shen Yuan can only feel bad for her. In the original, Luo Binghe was hardly ever sent out and if he were, it was usually in the form of subtle murder attempts by Shen Qingqiu.

In this timeline, Binghe has spent more time off the mountain than on it these past months, which in turn means that Ning Yingying spent more time missing him. Well, Shen Yuan knows how it feels.

He also misses Binghe every single time he has to leave.

At least now he can join classes again. The ones with swords and fighting and- all that. Shen Yuan is terribly behind, and he was never the most talented one in the class to begin with. But at least he can join in now! And even if he might not be good at the whole *wielding a sword by hand* bit, he can still make some awesome sword signs.

Look, he has to brag where he can. *Ning Yingying* is better at close combat than him! Ning Yingying! The clumsy wife who always got into bullshit situations up until the Endless Abyss arc! Her!

She can kick his ass!!!!!

It's deeply humiliating, but not as humiliating as the food they're about to force poor Binghe to eat. Shen Yuan desperately hopes they won't accidentally poison him. He hopes that Binghe will forgive them for what they are about to inflict upon his superior protagonist taste buds.

"Cooking wasn't as hard as this one thought it would be," Ning Yingying says, like the spoiled princess she is, she who has never actually done any chores beyond carrying around clean laundry and still managing to sort it wrong. Shen Yuan picks up a pair of chopsticks and considers throwing them at her.

“You cooked?” Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan fumbles, nearly dropping the chopsticks.

In the doorway, Binghe stands; they had left it open to let in a breeze, the summer heat suffocating, the sun at its highest, and this in turn had allowed him to sneak up on them. His hair is still heavy from the bath, and Shen Yuan clutches the chopsticks to his chest and pretends he wasn’t going to use them for unintended purposes.

“We did!” Ning Yingying replies, bouncing forward to grab Binghe’s arm and tug him into the bamboo house, “A-Yuan and Yingying worked very hard, so that A-Luo could take it easy!” She pauses and gives Binghe a smile, bright and warm, the kind of smile only a childhood sweetheart can give. “Welcome back, A-Luo,” she says, “we missed A-Luo so much.”

Luo Binghe smiles back at her.

“This one missed Shijie and Shixiong too.”

It is very cute.

Shen Yuan clears his throat and gestures towards the table of questionable food items, and the three cups of tea he has just poured. He sneakily puts the chopsticks back down.

“Binghe must be hungry,” he says, “this one was told by Master Wen that it was decided to forgo breakfast in order to return early?”

Binghe nods and settles down, dark eyes curiously glancing over the various plates. Shen Yuan can see how that sweet smile is twitching, and he just *knows* that Binghe wants to grin and make fun of them both.

“This humble one is excited to eat,” he instead says, and Shen Yuan narrows his eyes and reaches out. With a flick of his hand, he makes Binghe’s hair dry so fast it *poofs* out into what could be mistaken for a black cloud of fluffiness.

Ning Yingying, who had been settling down in her spot, takes one look and bursts into laughter so hard she falls on her side.

“Yuan,” Binghe says, touching his hair, “why?”

“Binghe knows why,” Shen Yuan says, a smile slowly spreading as he takes in the sight, “it’s because this Shixiong missed his Shidi *sooo* much, and would hate to see Binghe get a cold from wet hair.”

Ning Yingying cackles more like a witch than a cute teenage girl.

“Well, if *that* is why, then this Shidi is very grateful for the consideration,” Binghe returns with a straight face, only his eyes giving away his amusement. Shen Yuan has the sudden urge to pinch his cheeks, to force that neutral, polite smile into dropping the act.

Instead he pushes the crunchy looking bowl of rice towards Binghe.

“Now eat,” he says, “because Binghe is a growing boy,” and then Shen Yuan peers down at Ning Yingying, who seems to have trouble breathing. “Shijie?”

He gets a squeaky giggle-wheezing sound back.

Shen Yuan reaches over to poke at her, once, twice, until Ning Yingying finally manages to sit up. Her face is bright red, her braids askew, and he is pretty sure she *cried* from laughter. Now, he agrees that Binghe looks very endearing with his hair all fluffed out. But he doesn’t think it warranted laughing so hard that it turned into tears???

“This one missed A-Luo so much,” she giggles, and scoops some of the vegetables onto her own plate, “he looks like a sheep now! Or maybe a cloud? It’s very nice!”

“This Shidi thanks Shijie,” Binghe replies, inspecting the rice now on his plate. “Also… who made the rice?”

“That’s a secret,” Shen Yuan says before Ning Yingying can answer, and decides to avoid Binghe’s eyes by focusing on picking out his own food. He takes a slightly less burnt dumpling, and decides to steer clear of the suspicious veggies as he continues, “anyway, Binghe should be happy to know there’s only been two more raids since he last left.”

Binghe does not look happy, actually.

“I wonder when they will stop raiding our peak,” Ning Yingying says, and yup, there it is, rice crunching between his teeth. Shen Yuan tells himself it’s fine. He’s had worse. *Truly.* He even died once! “And always going for A-Yuan too! Even the little one, the one that looks like a sick little doll boy? Isn’t A-Yuan his teacher?”

“Lin Jie doesn’t look like a sick little doll boy,” Shen Yuan protests, even though he really does, “and Shijie should know, he actually picked up the brush on our latest lesson!”

To try and stab Shen Yuan with it. But it was progress! Besides, Zhu Kang had been there, and Shen Yuan thought he himself had been pretty cool when he used qi to snatch the brush out of Lin Jie’s hand with a flick of the wrist, making the brush swirl through the air and into his own hand.

Sure, the ink had gotten on all three of them, but it had still been cool.

“And *why* is Yuan still teaching him?” Binghe asks, “if he attacks Yuan so often… surely Mu-shishu doesn’t want Yuan to get hurt? So he would understand if the lessons stopped, right?”

“It’s because A-Yuan is too stubborn,” Ning Yingying reminds Binghe, ignoring the squawking protests of said Shen Yuan, “like how he’s not allowed to go off peak without permission from Ming-shixiong, but this Shijie still knows he visited Shang-shishu today!”

Shen Yuan whips his head around to stare at her. Ning Yingying, clearly knowing what she just said and why it was a bad idea, only gives him a smug little smile before she pops a burnt dumpling into her mouth.

Traitor!!!!

Slowly, Shen Yuan turns to look towards his best friend.

Luo Binghe's dark eyes meet his, and the disappointment is strong enough to make him wince. Shen Yuan hurriedly averts his eyes, but he can't make himself pick up the chopsticks which he had dropped in his outrage at the sudden betrayal.

"Yuan said he wouldn't visit Shang Qinghua."

"No I didn't," he protests, which was true. "Binghe just- just asked me not to, that's all. And you!" he points at Ning Yingying, "you promised to not tell anyone!"

"A-Yuan doesn't keep *his* promises, so why should Yingying?" she shoots back, which is so fucking childish!

It's not like he *meant* to stay away so much from Qing Jing Peak! What, is he supposed to say *no* to visiting other peaks that were never explored in the original? Is he supposed to tell Yue Qingyuan that they can't eat lunch together, when he is all big brotherly and patient??? Or to reject Mu Qingfang's offers to explain a medicine book in more depth, or Zhu Kang's invitations to the herbal gardens of really cool magical plants?

Is he supposed to just- just let Shang Qinghua walk around with massive bruises when he can fix them? No one else can ice the stupid idiot's sprained wrists and bruised ribs, or smuggle healing salves that even Mu Qingfang would question the constant use of! Not without suspicion. Besides, he always makes sure to attend the lessons now! He just- he is only gone during the free-times and lunch periods, and it's not like Ning Yingying doesn't have *other* friends!

"Also," Ning Yingying continues, "A-Luo is right. It's been months, and A-Yuan hasn't been able to teach the little boy anything, *and* he is always the first one to go for A-Yuan during the raids."

"Lin Jie just needs some patience!" he protests, cheeks flushed with that odd twist of guilt and shame and actual anger, because Luo Binghe still looks like a disappointed and kicked puppy and Ning Yingying is reminding him of the very worst parts of his Meimei from a different time– "and it can't be easy, being the youngest one on Bai Zhan Peak! If they find out that he is being taught by someone from Qing Jing Peak, it could be really bad for him!"

"That is only more reason to stop," Binghe says, "if you're concerned for his safety, is that not a sign?"

Shen Yuan looks at him; he looks at how Ning Yingying nods along, at how united they are in this anti-Lin Jie agenda.

It's great that the future couple are getting along, he tells himself as he clenches his hands under the table, and Binghe has only just returned home and they're all supposed to eat food and be happy and celebrate that Binghe is once again back in record time without any injuries.

However.

Lin Jie is a little bit bitey, yes. And he's a bit rude. But he's their Shidi, rival peak or not. It's not that he's *dumb,* either! He looks like he *wants* to learn how to read and write. They are important skills, and- and he needs to be fed and fussed over. Even if he doesn't seem to want it, a child is still a child. Lin Jie is just stubborn and scared, and Shen Yuan gets it. Sometimes you have to bite the hand that feeds you, to make sure it won't start beating you.

He doesn't understand how *Binghe* doesn't. And he can't understand where Ning Yingying's famous kindness disappeared off to.

"Lin-shidi deserves an education," he says, and the look that they both give him makes him want to *bite* something for the first time in months. Shen Yuan narrows his eyes. "In fact, this one will ask Ming-shixiong to send a message to Zhu-shixiong about it. Perhaps we will even have a lesson *today!"*

"Ming-shixiong is giving you extra sword lessons today," Ning Yingying says, cheeks puffed up in a cute display of annoyance, "so A-Yuan can't!"

"I can go after," Shen Yuan snaps back.

"But it would run late," Binghe says, "Yuan, don't you need your sleep?" he wheedles, and refills Shen Yuan's cup of tea without asking. *Wow,* he bitterly thinks, *how nice of you.* "Surely the boy can wait."

"Clearly this Shixiong hasn't given him enough attention," Shen Yuan stubbornly replies, "and should amend that right now, and ask Dashixiong for the lesson to begin early so that this one can see to Lin-shidi. This one isn't hungry, anyway." With that, Shen Yuan gets up and marches past them, ignoring their cries of protests and the sound of them scrambling to follow.

He makes sure to slam the door shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

YQY: *doing his paperwork*
SY, sitting by the same desk: *angrily jabs brush at fan*
YQY: ... what is Xiao-Yuan painting?

SY: a REMINDER.
YQY: I see. Is it a gift, then?
SY: it's.... a MESSAGE. For SHIZUN. From the heart. Yes.
YQY: aww ^_^ it is very artistic! I'll make sure he gets it. (Xiao-Yuan is so cute! Maybe one day he will paint for me as well?)

I do love me some pining YQY <3
And I also love tension :D

NYY did that over the shoulder throw on SY during hand-to-hand combat lessons, and he laid on the ground for a full five minutes, questioning his life choices. It's tough being the weak one! He thinks, briefly forgetting he nearly killed people with his panic attacks on a regular basis and has insane control over his qi. Wow, can't believe NYY kicked my ass, he despairs, and only gets up when Ming Fan starts yelling about it.

Time is speeding up! SQQ has spent a little more than three months in the caves now. This is Fine. Nine more to go!

Thanks as always for all the love!!!! Please know I truly appreciate it!

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan does not slam the door upon his return, but he is tempted.

The sun is setting outside; gone from sight, the sky a dark orange, making the surrounding peaks look like dark silhouettes. The air is cooler than before, enough so that Shen Yuan has to shake the feeling back into his hands from his flight back home. Or perhaps that is from letting Zhu Kang cool his stinging hands from when he tripped and fell right after the lesson ended, a feat he can't even blame on Lin Jie- though the gleeful smile on the boy's face hadn't helped.

But no, tripping had been all Shen Yuan, and it's part of why he is back so late. Zhu Kang had to heal his new scratches, before he also cooled the red skin with gentle qi. And then Shen Yuan had to reassure him he was fine before they went their separate ways, Zhu Kang flying Lin Jie back to Bai Zhan Peak, and Shen Yuan stepping onto Fu Yue to go back home.

He's so fucking tired.

Shen Yuan has learned the lesson that Shen Qingqiu's mere presence should have reminded him of; to teach when angry is a bad idea.

It had been the worst lesson yet, and that stings worse than his stupid hands. He flexes his fingers, the skin still raw and tingling-numb from Zhu Kang's treatment. The scratches are gone, healed, but the skin is new and feels odd and he just- ugh.

Shen Yuan closes the door with a click instead of slamming it the way he wants to. He lingers there, meeting the dark eyes of Binghe.

Luo Binghe is sitting by the table. The food from hours ago has long since been tidied away, plates gone and replaced by ink and paper. Shen Yuan almost asks what it is that Binghe is writing; but he remembers he is mad, and instead gives his best glare.

Binghe puts aside the brush and moves as if to rise.

"Yuan-"

"No," Shen Yuan says, freezing Binghe on the spot, "I don't want to."

His snapped words makes Binghe blink; he looks absolutely flabbergasted, still half-way up, hands pressed against the table. And then Binghe frowns and stands up all smooth and perfect, like the protagonist he is.

Shen Yuan can't even remember the last time Binghe tripped.

“What do you mean you don’t want to?” Binghe asks.

“I mean that I don’t want to talk,” he replies, his grasp on Fu Yue’s scabbard tightening as he walks past him, “I’m going to- to take care of Fu Yue, and then I’m going to bed.”

“You don’t want to-? Yuan!” Binghe protests, following behind as Shen Yuan stomps to get the whetstone and oil, “I am sorry!”

“No you’re not!” he shouts back, grabs the whetstone and immediately drops it. Fuck!!! Shen Yuan grits his teeth and goes to pick it up. But before he can reach down for it, Binghe steals it away.

Shen Yuan resists the super mature urge to stomp his foot.

“Binghe!” he protests and makes a swipe for it. Binghe, being the protagonist, obviously avoids the attempt. “Give it back!”

“Why would you say I’m not sorry when I said I’m sorry?” Binghe asks, and the fuck, Shen Yuan is *taller* than him, what- “stop!”

“You stop! Why are you climbing up the bookshelf!”

“Stop grabbing for the stone and I will stop,” Binghe argues, clinging precariously to the side of the bookshelf. Shen Yuan considers grabbing his ankle, which is within easy reach. But then the bookshelf might fall, and that would not be good for anyone.

“You’re being very childish,” he says instead and crosses his arms, fingers digging into them. It aches, forcing the newly healed skin to tense in a way it’s not yet used to. He doesn’t stop. “Get down from there before you hurt yourself.”

“Will Yuan listen to my apology if I do?”

Shen Yuan stares up at him.

Binghe has that stubborn look on his face; the one Shen Yuan remembers seeing back when Binghe still called Shen Qingqiu “Shizun” with respect and wanted Shen Yuan to tattle on Zhao De. The one he gets when he doesn’t immediately get a sword form right. The one Binghe gets, when he knows he can fix it, he just needs to figure out *how.*

If he lets Binghe talk, he knows he will be less mad. And he doesn’t want that. Yeah, it might be throwing stones in a glasshouse. It’s hypocritical and childish and- and *dumb,* but the lesson sucked, he embarrassed himself in front of both Zhu Kang *and* Lin Jie, and now Binghe is being so- so–!

“Why should I?” Shen Yuan bites out, “keep the whetstone, fine! I’ll take just care of Fu Yue tomorrow.” And he whirls around and stomps to the bedroom instead, yanking out the hairpin and letting it fall onto the bed table with a loud clatter.

He is more gentle when he puts Fu Yue to rest against the wall.

By the time Binghe joins him, Shen Yuan has yanked off one boot and untangled his belt and gotten no further. His stupid hands feel too big and clumsy, every touch alien. It makes it hard to tug at buttons and thin ribbons.

Luo Binghe lingers in the doorway, and Shen Yuan can feel his eyes upon him. He knows that Binghe is taking in how much Shen Yuan is struggling, and he bites back a swear at the humiliation of it all.

And then Binghe is there, kneeling on the floor and gently grabbing his wrists. Shen Yuan glares at the wall, but he doesn't yank his hands free.

Binghe is silent as he takes in the red skin; his touch gentle as he smooths his thumb over Shen Yuan's palm, but it still makes Shen Yuan's fingers twitch.

"What happened?" Binghe asks.

"Nothing," Shen Yuan replies, and tugs free. It's half-hearted at best, but Binghe loosens his grip, letting Shen Yuan hide his hands under his arms as he crosses them. "Don't worry about it."

"..."

Shen Yuan peeks at him.

Binghe looks–

"It was just some scratches," Shen Yuan mumbles, "that Zhu-shixiong healed. So it really is nothing, Binghe. And before you *ask,* no, it was *not* Lin Jie. I just- it was me. Alright? So stop looking like that."

"But it looks painful," Binghe says, "are you sure that he healed you properly? It's so red."

"He's the head disciple of Qian Cao Peak."

"One of them," Binghe retorts, "don't they have five?"

"Well, yes, but Zhu-shixiong is still one of them! Just because they have *more* doesn't make him a bad one." Though he was the youngest one. Not that Binghe knew that! Maybe? Whatever, Binghe had been on *several* co-op missions now with other peaks, why were they even talking about Shen Yuan's friend? Zhu Kang was way more trustworthy than those giggling girls from Xi Jiao Peak that Binghe last went on a mission with, so NPC they hadn't even become wives–

Hold up.

“Binghe,” he says, cheeks bright red as his friend begins to tug off his remaining boot, fingers quick and hands gentle, “I can do it myself.”

“You’re still mad at me,” Binghe stubbornly replies, “this is my apology.”

The protagonist should *not* help his sidekick get undressed. It makes Shen Yuan’s belly feel all weird and fluttery, but- well. His hands *does* hurt, and it *was* difficult to get rid of the first shoe. So maybe it’s fine, just this once.

“I’m still angry,” Shen Yuan says as Binghe grabs the shoe that Shen Yuan had yanked off before, lining it up next to the other one, “just so you know.”

“Alright,” Binghe says and helps Shen Yuan get free of his outer robe.

“And I’m not braiding your hair tonight,” he adds.

“Your hands hurt,” Binghe agrees, “this humble one will remember for now how to do it himself.”

Ugh.

“Binghe is so understanding,” he mutters back, and once he’s down to the last layers, Shen Yuan flops backwards onto the bed in a huff, “how nice.” It comes out sarcastically.

Where was this Binghe when they were talking about Lin Jie?

“... I *am* sorry for making you upset, Yuan.”

Shen Yuan squeezes his eyes shut.

That’s not the apology he wants though, now is it? But Binghe doesn’t say anything else after that, and Shen Yuan tells himself it’s a relief. Soon enough they are both tucked under the blankets, Binghe’s hair in a thick braid. Shen Yuan flicks the end of it, the way it curls reminding him of the tip of a lion’s tail. It’s soft, and Binghe hums in response.

They really *are* codependent, Shen Yuan thinks to himself as he hides his face against Binghe’s shoulder, aching hands resting against Binghe’s back.

He can’t ever be properly mad, even when he’s in the right.

“What happened to A-Yuan’s hands?” Ning Yingying asks the next day, leaning around

Binghe to stare pointedly at said hands making a clumsy attempt at wielding chopsticks. “Did the boy bite him? *Again?”*

Shen Yuan grits his teeth and ignores her.

“How many times has he bitten Yuan?” Binghe asks, dark eyes flicking between them both.

They are eating outside, though not by the tree. It’s too far away to get there before the next classes begin. It’s a shame, because the tree offers privacy, shade and a refreshing breeze.

The courtyard has shade. The walls surrounding it, however, shuts out any possible relief a bit of wind might bring. The summer heat is hitting Qing Jing Peak with the kind of fervor that reminds Shen Yuan of the unfortunate jokes Wei Qingwei likes to crack, each worse than the one before.

‘Why are mountains the best place to go in summer? Because they are HILL-arious!’

Shen Yuan shudders at the mere memory.

Is it possible to use qi to circulate the wind *juuuuust* around him? It should be, right? He can do the thing with leaves, and he can make puffs of air to blow out candles. Can he make a qi-fan? Fuck, it’s so hot and Ning Yingying is *so annoying.*

“Every single time,” she answers Binghe, “it’s like he doesn’t know that he can use his hands! Instead he always bites A-Yuan like some- some little- little *bea-”*

“He does not bite me every time!” Shen Yuan snaps, “and don’t call him that! Don’t call *anyone* that!”

“If he acts like one, why shouldn’t we?” Ning Yingying retorts, “Shizun would teach him properly, if he was here! And Shizun always says intent doesn’t matter, results do, and A-Yuan hasn’t gotten *any* results for months! Which is why he should stop teaching!”

Shen Yuan doesn’t snarl, even though he really wants to. He also doesn’t launch himself at Ning Yingying to pull at her stupid braids, the way he *also* wants to. He can’t fight her. She’s a future wife, and if there’s one thing that would make Binghe drop their friendship, surely it’s Shen Yuan punching Ning Yingying’s stupid nose.

Also hitting girls is bad.

Hitting Ning Yingying, Qing Jing Peak’s most special girl, is *worse.* Even though they have a new little Shimei in the shape of Chen Xiaoling, the title of Shizun’s favorite still rests squarely on Ning Yingying’s shoulders and smacking her would be the equivalent of trying to kill the Emperor.

These are all things that Shen Yuan has to remind himself of as they sit on the bench, Binghe sitting between them like a barrier of peace.

“Mu-shishu tasked this one with it, and this one will *keep teaching* unless Shishu tells this one to stop,” Shen Yuan hisses back, “and Shijie can’t stop me!”

“Shizun was right that one can’t reason with fools-”

“Alright,” Binghe cuts in before Shen Yuan lets loose a shriek of pure rage, “Shizun isn’t here, and we need to finish eating before calligraphy. Yuan is *not* a fool, and Shijie is right to be worried, because this one is worried as well, but that does not mean- Yuan!”

“Take her side! Whatever! I don't care!” he shouts and stomps off, feeling like his entire face is on fire, the chopsticks clattering in the bowl. There’s some food left, and he shouldn’t waste it because waste is bad and one of the things Binghe hates, but also he *has to leave.*

Of course Binghe would side with Ning Yingying!

Well, fine! It’s just making it easier to stay mad!

Puberty sucks.

This is a fact of life which Shen Yuan vividly remembers from his first life. Puberty is an awful thing, a curse upon humanity. It makes you irrational and impulsive and *weird,* and he hated it then and he hates it now. Of course, since his mind is that of a twenty year old adult (no matter *what* Airplane says) Shen Yuan knows he is at least safe from all of the mental horrors of an insecure teenager.

Pimples? Not so much. Despite cultivating, he still gets pimples.

Binghe doesn’t get pimples, but that’s hardly a surprise. The protagonist is destined to flawless skin, to thick, beautiful hair that never seems to get oily and perfect teeth that don't grow crooked. Shen Yuan may be taller, but he has never felt more awkward as puberty wreaks havoc upon his fourteen year old body.

The memories of his past life are forever fuzzy and distant, but he knows he wasn’t as tall then as he is now. Not at this age; and even as an adult, his legs weren’t so abnormally long compared to the rest of his body.

Shang Qinghua claims that Shen Qingqiu isn’t his dad, but Shen Yuan sometimes has *doubts* about that. How else does he have these insane stilts for legs? He could probably blend in with storks if he tried hard enough, their leg proportions match.

… Ning Yingying also doesn’t get pimples.

She looks like her normal, cute, perfect sweetheart self just as always. There is some- some *growth* in some areas that Shen Yuan is firmly ignoring, but she still looks pretty. He knows that it is because she is a wife, of course. But Shen Yuan likes the idea that while her body seems to be escaping the worst horrors of puberty, her brain is not.

It would explain why she's being such a bitch lately.

"Why must she be so rough?" Shen Yuan blurts out, lowering his book.

It is late evening; looking out the window shows the darkness of night, with the glows of lanterns visible along the paths of Qing Jing Peak. Golden flickers that at times show the shadows of patrolling disciples and masters passing by, a duty that Shen Yuan knows is not liked by any and which none puts any effort into.

Binghe looks up from his own book; it's one about the Endless Abyss, the cover a murky red that reminds Shen Yuan of blood. There may have been some coaxing involved in making Binghe read it, the topic obscure and having nothing to do with their current studies, seemingly useless and time consuming and an utter waste of time.

It is not that Shen Yuan has stopped being angry about- everything. Days have passed, but he still is, and he refuses to officially accept any apology that isn't said for the right reasons.

But the Abyss will happen in three years, and he *will* spend these three years stuffing Binghe's head full with Abyss facts, in between everything else. And if that means implying to Binghe that he will be less angry if Binghe reads a book about a hell place that no one actually knows shit about–

Then yeah, he will do it!!! Fuck morals!!!!

"Is Yuan talking about Shijie?" Binghe asks, concerned. "Is Yuan still in pain from today's class?"

"Not really," he mutters, though he can't help but rub a hand against his side. Ning Yingying had left a nasty bruise there, landing a perfect kick that Shen Yuan wished hadn't been as clean as it was. But healing himself of bruises has become an easy thing, and now he can hardly feel it. It still sucked though. Mostly because it was *Ning Yingying.*

And also because the System had ignored his mute button and way too happily told him he lost *twenty coolness points.* Like what!!! The fuck!!!

"Are you sure?" Binghe wonders, inching closer. When Shen Yuan doesn't move away, the other boy appears to take it as encouragement and inches close enough that their shoulders bump. "It… got intense."

That is the diplomatic way of saying 'that lesson quickly became a one-sided scuffle and you lost', and the reminder makes Shen Yuan flush red with mortification.

What happened had been utterly disgraceful. Despite the fact that hitting a girl, and hitting *Ning Yingying* especially, was a bad idea and something Shen Yuan had told himself to never do mere days ago-

He and Ning Yingying had still duked it out in the middle of class, and Ming Fan and Binghe had to separate both of them.

It hadn't been as bad as the Bai Zhan raids. No split lips or nosebleeds, not even scraped skin. Only bruises and a clumsy scuffle where they both had tried to pin the other down without actually touching each other. And still Shen Yuan had been the clear loser.

The only saving grace was that Binghe had been the one to pull Shen Yuan away, leaving Ming Fan to handle Ning Yingying.

"Why is she so rough? Shouldn't she be- you know! Nicer? Sweeter? Isn't she *Xiao-shimei?"* Shen Yuan asks, resting heavily against Binghe and sliding down a little bit, just until his head is laid against Binghe's shoulder. "Why is she so angry about Lin Jie? And don't! Don't say anything about how she is right to."

"Fine," Binghe huffs, but Shen Yuan feels him press his cheek against his hair, one of few touches that Shen Yuan doesn't mind there. A soft cheek can't grab the way hands can. "I won't say anything about that. But I truly don't know why she is still angry. Shijie won't tell me. She says I'm on your side, so it does not matter what she tells me."

Except Binghe was obviously on Ning Yingying's side.

Shen Yuan frowns and looks at the still open book on the table. It is the one that he found the 'Plucked Leaves, Flying Flowers' technique in. It is all about the theory of imbuing objects with qi and manipulating them in the way one might manipulate talismans. He had hoped to discover some shortcut to up his sword game, to make Fu Yue proud and cut down on the goddamn remedial lessons with Ming Fan.

Just a few weeks ago, Ning Yingying had whined about wanting to learn it as well. But the book was old and fragile, not something he dared to trust her with. Back then, she had just pouted before letting it go.

Was that part of it? That Shen Yuan didn't… what, bend over backwards for her, like the rest of the peak? Even after their scuffle, Ming Fan hadn't scolded her. Instead he had scolded *Shen Yuan* for being so rough with his precious, darling Xiao-Shimei. Ugh.

"Well, she's dumb," he mutters, "you *do* agree with her."

"... is it wrong to be worried?" Binghe asks, "Yuan, you keep- you keep getting hurt, and I can't do anything about it. Half the time I'm not even here, and- and is it wrong?" For each word, he sounds more frustrated.

"I'm not *that* helpless," Shen Yuan says, a blatant lie when one looks at all that's happened, "I can handle a Shidi! And I'm never alone with him- not that I think it would be a problem if

I was. It's just- it's just that *I* can't go to Bai Zhan Peak, so Zhu-shixiong has to go fetch him unless I'm already sleeping over at Shishu's place…"

Binghe sits up straight, and Shen Yuan reluctantly copies him, both turning to face each other. Binghe's jaw is set in that stubborn way of his, dark eyes glinting like the water Shen Yuan pulled Fu Yue from.

"It's not about you being helpless. I just don't want some random child biting you when you're being kind. Especially when that child is a brat from *Bai Zhan Peak,* whose disciples have an obsession with you that I'm sure can be traced back to Shen Qingqiu," Binghe angrily points out, which is, uh, not wrong.

Shen Yuan had kind of assumed it was because of the same-face thing.

Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge were known rivals; in the original, one had *murdered* the other. Or been wrongfully blamed for it, apparently, according to the goddamn author himself. In the original, Bai Zhan Peak often raided the other peaks as a form of training exercise, but Qing Jing had always gotten the brunt of it.

The fact that Shen Yuan is a tiny, less scary version of Shen Qingqiu is just too tempting of a target to pass up.

"What do you want from me?" Shen Yuan blurts out, throwing his hands up in the air, "I'm not going to give up! Lin-shidi is already having a rough time, I'm not going to make it worse by dropping the lessons just because you and Shijie are worried he *might* bite. I bite!"

"Let me join."

Shen Yuan pauses.

"Huh?"

"Let me join the lessons," Binghe says, hands in his lap, chin raised, "even just once. If it's not as bad as Shijie says it is, then I will drop it. But if it *is* that bad, then I want Yuan to stop putting himself in danger."

"Lin Jie is too little to be any danger-"

"Yuan."

Shen Yuan groans.

"Fine! Fine. Binghe can join," he says, and Binghe immediately perks up, like a puppy being given its favorite treat. All he needs is a tail to wag to complete the image. "But only if Binghe promises to sit quietly."

"Only if the boy doesn't try to attack Yuan."

Shen Yuan sighs.

“He won’t.”

Surely even Lin Jie wasn’t dumb enough to start a fight with three older boys at once? Nah, no way. He wouldn’t be that dumb.

Luo Binghe doesn’t look so convinced.

Ning Yingying sits down with a *thud* next to Shen Yuan.

Her cheeks are puffed up like an angry chipmunk, and for a moment they side-eye each other, eyes locking before they both snap back to the sight before them.

Binghe is going up against Heng He in a sparring session; practice sword swooping down in an arc of challenge, Heng He standing carefully still as their teacher explains why both of their footworks are *perfect* and *to be taken note of,* Binghe only having to adjust the way his knee bends once.

At fourteen, Binghe is paired with the older disciples because he is almost on their level. Heng He is a logical fit; he’s been the one most often sent out on missions and night hunts with Binghe these past months.

Heng He isn’t really someone that Shen Yuan has taken much note of; he wasn’t part of the bullying, nor did he step in to stop it. He’s kind of been the guy that they get shoved off onto when Ming Fan is too busy to deal with the three of them.

He kind of has that NPC look to him; black, straight hair in a neat bun, black eyes and a weak chin. Heng He looks like he has never been startled in his life, not because he is aware of his surroundings but just because he looks so damn placid.

Or in short: Heng He looks like the kind of guy you pass by and immediately forget about.

But the dude is still a cultivator, and years ahead of them. As the wooden swords clash, Shen Yuan reluctantly has to admit that Binghe still has *some* catching up to do. But the gap is not as wide as the rest of them, and Binghe is doing a good job at keeping Heng He at bay.

“A-Luo said that Shidi is going to let him sit in on the lesson,” Ning Yingying abruptly says, and Shen Yuan stills.

“... and?” he asks, not looking at her as he inwardly curses Binghe for tattling. It probably

happened during breakfast, didn't it? Fuck!

"This one wants to do the same," she says, and he snaps his eyes to her. Ning Yingying's brown eyes are narrowed into what would be a frightful glare on literally anyone else, ruined by her still puffed up cheeks and bright orange ribbons. One of those ribbons flutter in the winds, smacking against her face.

"No," Shen Yuan snaps.

He watches as her face grows red, before he throws a quick glance towards their teacher. But the old woman seems too focused on doing her job to pay them any mind.

Turning back to Ning Yingying, his brief moment of distraction seems to have made her turn even redder, a feat he would have thought impossible if he wasn't witnessing it right then and there.

"Why not?" she demands, leaning into his space, hands slammed down onto the bench. The other disciples are very clearly not looking at them, "why can A-Luo but not me? That's not fair."

"Because Binghe can sit quietly and A-Ying can't," he hisses back, stubbornly staying where he is.

This, for whatever reason, does not calm her down.

"This one can be quiet!" she protests furiously, before adding, "don't shush me!"

"Does Shijie *want* Master Ling to hear?" he says so low that his stupid teenage voice cracks, "this one is *not* going to be punished just because Shijie wants to act like a *child–"*

Ning Yingying gasps.

And then to prove her maturity, she shoves him.

There's a new boy at the House.

Lin Jie stops in the doorway, so suddenly that the Red One walks into him. Normally, Lin Jie would bite him for that or maybe stomp on his foot if he felt *charitable,* a word that Shen taught him. But there's a new boy sitting on a chair and staring at him, and Lin Jie can't break eye-contact. It would mean losing, and Lin Jie *hates* losing. So he glares back, the boy's face blurry but still visible enough that Lin Jie can see the frown on his stupid face.

“This one greets Lin-shidi,” Shen says, sitting on his spot on the couch, putting things where he always puts them, as if Lin Jie will ever use any of it for anything but weaponry, “And Zhu-shixiong! Did everything go well today?”

The Red One chuckles, closing the door behind them with a *click.* Lin Jie twitches as he moves past him, barely touching but still too close, long sleeves brushing against Lin Jie’s bare arms.

“There was no trouble, Shen-shidi,” the guy says, all fake-nice, as if Lin Jie hadn’t been clawing at his arms the whole way to the healing peak. Fucking liar who lies. Lin Jie sneers, but there’s more important things.

“Who’s that?” he snaps and points at the new guy.

“Oh, this is Luo Binghe,” Shen says with a smile, “does Shidi not remember him? He’s from Qing Jing Peak as well, and will be joining us today.”

Luo Binghe?

He squints; slowly, Lin Jie walks inside, flexing his fingers as he does. The new guy doesn’t move from where he is, which is good. He’s far away from Lin Jie’s spot, which is even better. Sitting on a shitty chair instead of the couch, on the other side of the table.

The couch is soft. Obviously, Lin Jie doesn’t *need* soft things, but sitting on the couch is better than sitting on the floor, where Shen and the Red One can hover over him. Sitting on the couch is *equal grounds*.

Lin Jie tucks all limbs close to his body and glares at Luo Binghe.

There’s dark hair and black eyes, and the green-white clothes that match Shen’s clothes. A lot of people on Qing Jing Peak wear those clothes. It’s the bad colors, he knows, the ones they are supposed to always fight. Lin Jie has been on almost every raid to the bamboo place.

This close, he *does* kind of recognize Luo Binghe.

He thinks the guy punched him in the face once. Or twice. But many people have punched him in the face, so that doesn’t mean anything.

Lin Jie pulls his lips back in a snarl.

“Why?” Lin Jie asks.

Shen tucks hair behind one ear, his smile is.... it is the smile he usually has *after* these lessons, not before them. Lin Jie doesn’t like it when people smile, but Shen almost always smiles, and so it has been important to recognize what kind of smiles those are. This one doesn’t fit into the routine, and Lin Jie curls up tighter, muscles tense, ready.

“Binghe only wished to see how these lessons work,” Shen says, “and won’t join again after this one.”

The new guy doesn’t look happy about *that.*

“Yuan-”

“What? Binghe has to leave for another night hunt in three days, does he not? Besides,” Shen continues, nudging a brush closer to Lin Jie’s side of the table, “Binghe does not need these lessons.”

Lin Jie knows that Shen never goes out on night hunts, because he is weak. *Everyone* at Bai Zhan Peak knows that as much as they know that Shen Qingqiu is an Enemy and Disgrace and should be rallied against. He doesn’t think the Red One goes out on those either.

But this guy does?

Lin Jie eyes him once more. His hair looks too soft. Can he *really* fight? That doesn’t seem right. But Lin Jie keeps his mouth shut. Instead, his stomach speaks for him in a loud, gurgling sound.

“... shall this one go and find nourishment for us?” the Red One says, breaking the tense silence that had only just begun to fall. “Learning is best done on a full stomach.”

Shen’s smile is a little bit more normal when he aims it at the Red One.

“This one thanks Shixiong,” he says.

The Red one smiles one of those stupid smiles he only gives Shen, gives a nod to the new guy, and then leaves. Normally this would be when Lin Jie tries to make a break for it, or when he’s too stiff from bruises, snaps his teeth in warning against Shen.

Today, he decides to stay where he is.

The lesson begins like it always does; Shen ties off his sleeves so they’re not in the way- as if he can’t just *not* wear long sleeves, idiot- and he explains what he is writing as he writes it. He always begins with Lin Jie’s name these days, black streaks in three different rows, because apparently there’s different *characters* and Shen doesn’t know which one is the right one, so he just writes three different ones.

Lin Jie doesn’t know either.

His name is something he was given by some person that thought he looked like jade, and he had accepted the name along with the bread given to him. But he hadn’t stuck around to see what *else* Lin Jie was. But Shen doesn’t know that.

Lin Jie isn’t going to tell him, anyway.

Once Shen gives up on making him copy the symbols, he moves on to other things. Food, bed, all that stuff. Not that Lin Jie pays attention.

The new guy keeps staring at him.

Not *always.* Sometimes, his eyes are on Shen instead. But whenever he looks at Lin Jie, he has a look on his face that Lin Jie hates. It makes him want to bite. It's the kind of face that Lin Jie has seen on the older disciples at Bai Zhan Peak, or that time he ate a bird in a cage at the all men peak. It had been yellow and apparently *special,* and ended up giving Lin Jie a broken nose.

Not the bird, but the guy who owned the bird.

Lin Jie wouldn't get punched by a *bird.* They didn't even have hands. But this guy does, and the guy's face keeps getting darker as the lesson continues.

So what if Lin Jie hisses at Shen? So what if he puts the peels from the orange fruits on the papers given to him, once he's done eating them? It's *his* paper, isn't it? So what if he throws away the stupid food sticks to eat with his hands instead, and so what if he aims the sticks at Shen? Shen catches them anyway. Shen catches *everything* that Lin Jie throws at him. It's so annoying.

The Red One doesn't even bother trying to catch anything anymore. He just sits in a corner, looking through some scroll, only sometimes looking up. *He* knows that Shen always catches things without even using his hands. Isn't this new guy from the bamboo place as well? Shouldn't he *know* that Shen always catches everything?

Shen is dumb, but he's at least good at that.

Lin Jie doesn't think that Shen knows the guy is making faces. Not until Shen suddenly puts the brush down (carefully making sure it doesn't touch the table, because stains are bad, or so Shen claims) and then Shen is turning away from Lin Jie and towards the new guy.

"Binghe," he says, "stop it."

Binghe blinks.

"This one isn't doing anything," he replies, like a liar, and despite how stupid Shen is, even *he* knows it's a lie. Lin Jie watches as Shen frowns, green eyes narrowing and arms crossing.

"Lin Jie can't concentrate," Shen says, "please behave."

"Ah, Shidi," the Red One says, "he really hasn't done anything. Lin-shidi is behaving much like always."

As if the Red One saw anything. Lin Jie knows his own eyes are shitty, things are always blurry and hard to focus on, but the Red One must be actually *blind* if he hasn't seen the way this Binghe glares.

But the tension in the air only grows thicker, and Lin Jie watches as Shen and Binghe stare at each other, the new guy still trying to look innocent even though Shen has seen through his fake-face.

“This one has been doing as Shixiong told him to,” the guy says, “sitting quietly and not interfering. Truly.”

“Don’t do that!”

“This one isn’t *doing anything-”*

“Binghe knows what this one is talking about,” Shen protests, standing up, hands clenched into fists by his sides, “Binghe promised to behave!”

“... maybe Lin Jie and this one will take a quick break,” the Red One says, and suddenly he is right there, having snuck up while Lin Jie was keeping an eye on Shen and the guy, because Shen said that Binghe went on night hunts, which means Binghe is stronger than Shen, which *means–*

But the Red One is too close.

Lin Jie bites down on the hand reaching for him, and then things go very quickly. There’s a yelp from Red One, and then other hands are trying to tug Lin Jie away. So Lin Jie lets go to bite at *those* hands instead, but misses. His kick does *not,* though, and he manages to kick Shen in the gut, forcing out an *oomph!* sound from him.

“Shidi,” Shen wheezes, “calm down, please-” and he makes the mistake of letting go, which lets Lin Jie twist around to bite at him again, because an opportunity should never be missed. But instead of Shen’s bare arm, sleeves still tied out of the way, Lin Jie tastes fabric.

Luo Binghe grits his teeth; dark eyes narrowed into slivers of something furious. It makes Lin Jie bite down even harder.

What follows is a lot of yelling, tugging, biting and kicking. Lin Jie can proudly claim that he managed to bite each one at least once, a true feat considering that they’re all bigger than him and outmatched him three to one.

Lin Jie may have bad eyes and he may be small, but he’s not *weak.*

He swipes at the ink on his face afterwards, smearing it further. He had at some point fallen onto the inkwell, and now he’s covered in it, the brawl having gone on long enough that he managed to smack it onto Shen’s arm and the new guy’s stupid face. He sticks his tongue out at the new guy, but is ignored.

That’s fine, because Shen is yelling at him anyway.

“Even Shijie would behave better!” Shen yells, hand held by the Red One as he is being

healed.

Lin Jie got them all so good. He grins to himself.

“The deal was that if he did *that,* Yuan would stop!” Binghe yells back, “I didn’t start anything! Yuan can’t blame me for that!”

“Binghe certainly didn’t *help!”*

“Perhaps we should all take a deep breath-” the Red One says, and is ignored, as is right. Fucking idiot.

“I did exactly as Yuan told me to! I’m not going to smile when you’re being disrespected, he kept throwing things at you!”

“Binghe didn’t have to *smile–!”*

“Yuan is BLEEDING!”

“SO IS BINGHE! And so is Shidi, and Shixiong, *everyone* are fucking bleeding!” Shen shouts.

Lin Jie shifts further back where he is sitting, squeezed in between a bench and a big rock. He tucks all of his limbs close, until he is certain that nothing is sticking out. This way, once they turn their anger at him, they will have a harder time dragging him out.

Shen is right. Everyone is bleeding. Lin Jie licks at his split lip, a worthy sacrifice from when he crashed into the table. It had let him kick the Red One right in the dick. He savors the memory, and then blinks and focuses back on the fight, realizing he missed part of it.

“– no I’m not going to stop teaching!” Shen snaps, tugging his healed hand free from the Red One, “This doesn’t count!”

Before Binghe can snap something back, Shen whirls around and stomps over to where Lin Jie is sitting. He crouches before him, and Lin Jie watches as Shen tries to smile instead of frowning. It doesn’t work. The smile is a new one, because it’s not a proper smile at all. Lin Jie curls up tighter and narrows his eyes.

“Is Shidi alright?” Shen asks, and holds out a piece of fabric.

Lin Jie considers biting him again.

Instead he snatches the cloth and wipes his face clean. By the time Lin Jie throws it back out from his spot, Shen’s smile looks like an actual smile. Most importantly, the two guys behind Shen look mad.

Lin Jie *definitely* won this fight.

Victory tastes a lot like losing, he thinks, blood on his tongue.

But it’s still winning, which makes it all worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Lin Jie, who has never won a fight: it counts if everyone ELSE loses too, right? Right? I fucking knew it. I WON!!!!
SY: you're bleeding.
Lin Jie: victory...

LBH: I know that guy will bite. I know it. I'm going to make sure he doesn't get too close to Yuan, he's gotten hurt too many times.
LJ: *rude, intentionally being a messy eater, smearing food on the teaching materials, snaps teeth like a dog at SY*
LBH: *GLARE INTENSIFIES*
SY: Binghe stop it. Look at Lin Jie. He's so smol. So precious. Too good for this world. Don't be mean to him.
LBH: !??!?!?!
LJ: *smug*

That is how I outlined that scene. Not kidding.
That's my advice to you guys. Feeling stuck? Write it out in a funny way!
Also Lin Jie's pov was written to the epic theme song of Kirby Dream Land. After all, Coconut Mall from Mario Kart is reserved for traumatic scenes, not angry kids fighting scenes. I love video game music.

(YQY's pov the previous chapter was written to Resting Grounds from Hollow Knight.)

Behold, Lin Jie the professional shit starter! He's very proud of himself.

This chapter was a CHALLENGE for me to write, I will tell you that. Writing arguments between emotional teens without going for the throat the way SQQ does? Leaving no survivors, including himself? A difficult balance! But it was fun, and if nothing else, I've gotten to practice it now :D

Art!!! There's art!!!!!! <3
Linecrosser has drawn a BEAUTIFUL Lady Jia taking care of her favorite doll <3
I especially love the detail of Shen Yuan clearly wearing the clothes of a female servant. ehehehe.

You can find me as Grubus on tumblr!

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cultivators are people of myth and legend; they perform impossible feats, help the downtrodden and live far past what a normal human is capable of. And yet, Luo Binghe thinks, blinking rapidly, eyes stinging–

And yet, smoke from the campfire remains a problem.

The fire is a bright orange in the late evening, a flickering of flames that becomes white-blue at the center. He watches as the fuel crumbles and twists within, tree shavings being consumed. The smoke continues to drift in his direction, and Luo Binghe wants to rub his eyes.

Having a campfire is not a common thing for these missions.

Normally there are inns, or their quarry is something that a fire would only scare away. Luo Binghe has slept in many trees these past months, more so than he has slept in any beds. But this hunt is different from the others, which is why disciples from Xi Jiao have joined them.

What they are hunting is the Many Eyed Cloud Viper, which is a demonic creature that stays far away from settlements. Shen Yuan told him once of how they are small and hard to see, moving like wisps of clouds through tall grass and deep waters. Only their eyes, which littered their bodies like scattered jewels, were bright enough in color to be spotted.

They are useful for many things, or so he's been told by the scrolls given to each of them. Scales and venom for medicine, blood for special talismans, even their eyes are priceless as jewelry. They are impossible to breed in captivity, difficult to find and harder to catch. Those from Xi Jiao, being the beast peak, are perfect for accompanying them on this mission.

Though it's probably more accurate to say that Qing Jing Peak is accompanying *them,* not the other way around. Right now, they are still too far away from their breeding grounds for a fire to disturb them, but also too far away from any villages that might offer lodging.

Luo Binghe looks down at Zheng Yang.

The sword sings to him as he drags an oiled cloth across the blade. The best way to describe the feeling is to say that if bursts of sunshine could have a voice, that would be it. Warm and intense and eager to be of use, Zheng Yang nearly vibrates in his hands.

It's so different from Fu Yue.

They had exchanged swords early on, just to see how it would feel. Yuan had said that some swords would get angry about it, but that brothers in arms could often wield each other's

swords, if only briefly. He had been excited to see if their swords would accept them both, saying it would be *awesome* if they could do it during a fight.

Fu Yue had been a calming, grounding presence.

The girls across the campfire burst into loud giggles, and when Luo Binghe takes a peek, he sees them looking at him. Seeing that he has taken notice, they immediately turn away, giggles now muffled behind their hands.

Luo Binghe wrinkles his nose.

They keep *doing that.* Not all of them- the older disciples and the other boys act like normal, but those two girls always giggle around him. It's annoying, especially because he can't figure out *why.* His hair is neat, his appearance clean and he knows he's not handling Zheng Yang wrong. There's no reason to giggle!

Is it because the smoke is going in his direction? But that doesn't fit- they've been giggling the entire trip, never actually talking to him. They were like that last time they joined missions together, too.

Even Shen Yuan had found them annoying and he doesn't find that *brat* annoying, despite how-

Luo Binghe takes a deep breath, before slowly letting it out.

"Tired?" Heng He asks.

The older boy flicks wood shaving into the fire with a flick of his wrist; Luo Binghe looks at the piece of wood in his hand, the way he holds his carving knife. He's seen Heng He carve a lot during these months- he wonders if that is where Ning Yingying got her inspiration from, seeing Heng He do it. The guy is good at it, and he has done it for longer than he has been cultivating, with thin, white scars littering his fingers.

"No, Shixiong," Luo Binghe replies and tucks his hands into his sleeves to avoid rubbing his eyes.

Heng He hums and continues to carve. Luo Binghe watches him do so, the sight oddly calming. The dark surface peeled away to reveal the pale wood underneath. All around them, the others of the group murmur among themselves. Some have already gone to bed- they will be the ones to wake up early for the last watch.

"The three of you are still fighting?" Heng He abruptly asks.

Luo Binghe sits up straight.

"This one- that is- what?"

Heng He's black eyes flick to him for half a second, before focusing back on his work.

“This Shixiong had hoped it would be resolved by now,” Heng He says, “especially as Shen-shidi gave Luo-shidi a hug for goodbye, and Shimei had been there as well.”

Luo Binghe looks down at his boots.

It was true that Shen Yuan had hugged him before they parted again. He had even braided Luo Binghe’s hair that same morning, hands lingering. The silence had been tense, but not-not *too* tense. More like they were both expecting the other to speak, but neither did, both too stubborn to be the first one to break.

The hug had been long as well.

Even Ning Yingying’s hug had been clingy.

“... Yuan- that is, Shixiong is still mad.”

“Luo-shidi can call him Yuan around this Shixiong,” Heng He says, “this one has heard it plenty these past two years, and knows now that it’s not intended to be an insult, even if the reason for why escapes this one.” Heng He hums and turns the wood over in his hand. “Just like how Shidi should be calling Shen Yuan *shidi,* not Shixiong.”

“... Yuan thinks he might be older than this one.”

“But he joined the sect after Luo Binghe,” Heng He points out.

That is true. Luo Binghe’s cheeks feel warm as he mumbles;

“It’s to tease Yuan. He doesn’t like being called Shixiong by this one.”

“Ah. Is that part of the argument? How is Shimei involved?”

“That’s not…” Luo Binghe bites his lip.

Is it alright to talk about it? He’s not certain. Their fight is clearly not a secret, that much he already knew. But he’s not certain of what the rules are about all of this. Shen Yuan is his first friend, Ning Yingying his second. Neither are good at these things either, somehow leaving Binghe to be the most socially aware one.

That doesn’t mean he feels secure in it.

Right now, it feels like he is holding onto scraps of joy. It feels like this friendship will end, even as he clings to what he knows; Shen Yuan doesn’t give up on people, even when he should.

“We had a lot of fights in our group,” Heng He says, and Luo Binghe looks back at him as Heng He continues, “a lot of bickering. Most of the ones in this one’s age group were second or younger sons of merchants or low ranked nobles, with a lot to prove. The politics were

intense, most of our fights ending with severed friendships or punishments for causing disturbances. Shizun did not like infighting were he could see it."

Heng He holds up the wood to the light.

It doesn't look like anything yet; but there's no bark, no rough surface left. In the flickering light of the campfire, it almost looks like gold.

"It became better when Zhao De was kicked out," Heng He says, "and Ming-shixiong began to handle his duties differently, and Shizun's punishments became less severe as a result of everything that happened. But our fights were nothing like what you three have going on, which means there should be less to worry about."

"... how so?"

"Shidi cares if he hurts the other two, does he not?"

Luo Binghe scowls.

"Of course!"

"He cares not because he *wants* them to hurt, but because he wishes to avoid doing so, correct? Already, that is better. This Shixiong doesn't know what exactly is going on, nor do I really care. It will resolve itself, because the three of you are friends."

Heng He raises a brow at him.

"Sometimes, one part must bend to avoid the rest breaking," he says, and he's been calm the entire conversation. His voice was low and even casual, as if their conversation didn't make Luo Binghe feel all kinds of things.

"But- but I tried that," he says, frustrated, "and it only became worse. This one tried to be the reasonable one, and I still…"

Heng He shrugs.

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder," and then he smiles, one corner of his mouth turning upwards, "and so do gifts. Does Luo-shidi want to learn how to carve?"

Up ahead, Binghe marches forward, A-Ying skipping alongside him. They seem happy, as if there's nothing wrong with the void surrounding them. As if they do not see it, do not see

him.

Shen Yuan is standing alone, a rift growing wider before him. Hundreds of hands claw at the edges, their fingers ending in long and sharpened nails, and in their palms there are lips painted a lurid red, smiling so sweetly, and he knows he can't let them touch him, he can't, he can't.

But if he does not cross the rift before it's too late, he's going to be left behind. Ahead, Binghe marches forward, A-Ying skipping alongside him, their hands brushing and he wants to join them, he *does,* but the hands in the rift reach for him, wrists pale, the mouths cooing *A-Yuan, A-Yuan,* and if they grab him–

If they grab him, they will tug him all the way down, but if he doesn't follow, he will never catch up and if he can't catch up then what *use is he?* So he tries to leap over it, breath catching in his throat as he flies through the air and he will make it, and he does. He lands on the other side and moves to run after them, heart beating.

Hands grabs hold of his ankle and they laugh as he screams–

Shen Yuan gasps awake.

His hands are burning hot, his chest tight and he can't breathe. He flails in bed, blankets tangling his legs and there's a burst of bright light as he loses control, energy exploding outwards. Something breaks, but he can't see what, too busy trying to breathe, breathe, *breathe–!*

The door slams open and there's hands grabbing his wrists. Shen Yuan whines and tries to tug free, but the grasp is too tight, impossible to escape even as the glow under his skin glows brighter and brighter, every vein and bone highlighted because of it, burning hot and revealing Yue Qingyuan's furrowed brows as the dark room lights up with it.

A different warmth swoops inside, and Shen Yuan's fingers curl inwards, his breath hitching. Yue Qingyuan's qi is not cold like Shen Qingqiu's, nor carefully balanced like Mu Qingfang's.

It's warm and it's roaring, like a forest fire that Shen Yuan can dip his hands into without being burnt. It feels *wild* in such a startling way that before Shen Yuan knows it, he can breathe again, the panic giving way to surprise.

He blinks away tears, only then realizing he's been squeezing his eyes shut. Somehow, he ended up pressing his face against Yue Qingyuan's chest, wet stains left behind on the man's sleeping robes.

That's embarrassing.

Shen Yuan sniffles, but he can't make himself pull away. Instead he burrows in deeper, and the hands on his wrists let go, letting him wrap his arms around Yue Qingyuan as the man's hands settle on his back. The warmth returns, still strange, but now a comfort as it cradles the writhing meridians within. Slowly, he melts into it. Breathing becomes easier. By the time that his meridians have calmed the fuck down, Shen Yuan is only sitting upright because of Yue Qingyuan's hug.

(+20 F-points!) the system chimes, and Shen Yuan groans.

"Xiao-Yuan?" Yue Qingyuan murmurs, "are you alright?"

Shen Yuan tries to speak, but all that comes out is a croak. Finally, he nods, before he shakes his head instead, because no. He's tired. He feels like he's a towel that's been wrung out to the point of nearly tearing in two.

"Tea?"

Tea would be nice. For a moment, he hugs closer, but that's not very tea-efficient. So he forces himself to let go and sit up straight, feeling wobbly even from that simple motion.

Yue Qingyuan's dark eyes are filled with concern; the man's hands hover awkwardly between them, perhaps wanting to continue with soothing Shen Yuan's meridians. There are dark spots on his robes, and Shen Yuan is suddenly far too aware of how snotty and gross he feels.

He hides his burning face behind his hands.

"Yes please," he says, muffled.

"Alright. Wait a moment, gege will make some."

Yue Qingyuan gives his arm a squeeze, and then Shen Yuan feels the man move away. Hears his footsteps as he leaves the room, muffled by the carpets. A moment passes before Shen Yuan peeks between his fingers.

Seeing that Yue Qingyuan is truly gone, he lets himself flop face down into his pillow. It's wheatbuck, because unlike fucking Shen Qingqiu, their beloved sect leader knows those are the *best* ones, not the porcelain bullshit that Shen Yuan has caught sight of in quick peeks into Shen Qingqiu's bedroom and- and *fuck.*

He had been doing so well for so long. For months, there hasn't been a single qi deviation except maybe some sparks at his fingertips. And then he has to go and have one in Yue Qingyuan's home, which will totally make things *so* much better. Why not when he slept over at Shang Qinghua's place? Airplane would *never* want to know the details. And even if he did, Shen Yuan could just tell him to fuck off.

… he really hopes that Yue Qingyuan doesn't ask.

Shen Yuan might just implode and die.

He lays there for what feels like forever. The longer he stays still, the weaker he feels. Even laying down is exhausting- his limbs tremble, his hands still feel itchy with warmth. Shen Yuan wants to wipe his face, but he isn't sure if he can even raise a hand to do so.

There's a weak attempt at rubbing his face against the pillow, but he thinks it only made it worse.

Shen Yuan turns his head, cheek against pillow, and takes in the room.

Staying empty most of the time, Shen Yuan isn't sure what its original use was. Perhaps it is meant to be a future head disciple's room, or maybe it's a guest room put too close to the sect leader's. Maybe it used to be a storage room, and Yue Qingyuan overhauled the entire thing the moment Shen Yuan asked to stay over that first time.

It's a nice room either way.

The walls are creamy white, like the room he sleeps in at Qian Cao Peak. But it's also lined with wood so dark it looks black, carved with insanely detailed birds and flowers climbing the frames all the way to the ceiling, which is made from the same kind of wood. There is also a single, perfectly rectangle shaped window facing a private garden which is only accessible through Yue Qingyuan's bedroom.

The floor is wood- what little of it he can see. Most of it is covered in thick, comfortable carpets that make absolutely no attempt to match. There's green and red, blue and purple. He's pretty sure the white one by the bronze mirror is actual fur of a very, very fluffy monster. It only makes Shen Yuan more sure that they are a new addition because otherwise it would have been a terrible waste of carpets for an otherwise empty room.

Shen Yuan stares at the broken cabinet.

He had heard something break, but he hadn't realized it was the biggest piece of furniture in the room. But there it is; wood splinters all over the fluffy carpets, half of the cabinet a mess from the energy blast that Shen Yuan unleashed. The other half looks untouched, but when the rest of it looks like a bomb went off, well. You can't really save that. The entire thing will need to be replaced. The remains need to be, like, cremated. Holy shit. It deserves a funeral for what he did to it. It looked like a really old family heirloom kind of cabinet, too. Probably older than him. Maybe older than Yue Qingyuan. And he qi-blasted it.

Shen Yuan wants to curl up and hide under the blanket.

But he's tired and weak, so he just lays there until Yue Qingyuan returns with a cup of tea.

The tea is the same that Mu Qingfang gives him whenever he is too restless; the intended purpose being to smell nice and to calm him down. It's a comfort, though Yue Qingyuan has to help him sit up. The cup is a familiar mottled green, rimmed with bronze-brown. He thinks maybe it's the twin of the one Binghe accidentally broke back at the bamboo house.

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan says, and Yue Qingyuan smiles at him.

“It is the least I can do for Xiao-Yuan,” he says, peeling a mandarin, the citrus scent mixing pleasantly with the tea’s. Shen Yuan takes a sip and watches him for a moment.

Yue Qingyuan’s hair hangs loose and messy in what is clearly a proper bedhead. He’s not even trying to smooth it out; he hasn’t even glanced at the exploded furniture in the room, and he didn’t seem to mind as he walked over the splinters scattered all over the floor despite being barefoot. And yet…

Shen Yuan fidgets.

Yue Qingyuan holds out a slice of mandarin, and Shen Yuan accepts it. It’s plump and orange, promising nothing but delicious sweetness. He looks at it and listens as Yue Qingyuan continues to peel the rest of it.

“... I broke the cabinet,” Shen Yuan mumbles.

“I will put in a new one,” Yue Qingyuan replies without missing a beat, “so Xiao-Yuan needn’t worry.”

Shen Yuan bites his lip.

He doesn’t- he doesn’t want to talk about it. Obviously. And Yue Qingyuan isn’t asking. Even though Shen Yuan must have woken half the peak, if not the entire fucking mountain.

“Gege isn’t mad?” he asks, feeling his face warm, the question coming out more childish than he wanted. He feels less like he is fourteen and more like he is eight and whispering to Duán Chen for advice, even though he hasn’t seen Duán Chen since- well- since–

The question does make Yue Qingyuan pause; the white inside of the peel pressing against his thumb, upturned just enough to show. Shen Yuan’s heart stutters in his chest, and he holds the cup of tea a little tighter, willing the warmth of it to seep all the way into his bones. He stares at the man’s hands, cradling that orange fruit.

Slowly, Shen Yuan dares to glance up to meet dark brown eyes.

“I could never be mad at Xiao-Yuan,” Yue Qingyuan says when he does, eyes warm, voice firm. “No matter what Xiao-Yuan breaks, this gege will *never* be angry with him.”

Shen Yuan searches his face. In another life, he wasn’t good at reading faces, and in this one it’s easier, but only slightly and only because of… habits that he learned from before joining Cang Qiong Mountain.

But he thinks Yue Qingyuan means it.

Shen Yuan manages a wobbly smile.

Yue Qingyuan's house doesn't fit him.

It's big, with long hallways and many rooms that tend to echo when one steps into them. Everything is so *empty,* and half the time Shen Yuan feels like he's walking through a museum rather than the sect leader's house. It's just not decorated enough- and what there is to be found is ancient and was clearly placed there before Yue Qingyuan took over.

There's exactly two places in the entire building that looks like it's being lived in; Shen Yuan's bedroom and the kitchen.

The kitchen is also way too big for just one man, but in the past it was clearly used by many cooks. Shen Yuan is pretty sure the entire house is meant to hold actual *staff,* with like… actual service experience, and not just cultivators. He wonders if Yue Qingyuan removed those positions, or if they were left empty before the guy stepped up into the leadership role.

It feels weird to ask though. So Shen Yuan hasn't.

But the kitchen is big, the shelves stuffed to the brim with food. It's mostly the kind that lasts long, like nuts and rice and preserves. One corner of the kitchen is more used than the others, and Shen Yuan has had the dubious honor of watching Yue Qingyuan cook in that corner.

Look, the guy isn't *awful* at cooking. Shen Yuan doesn't mind eating the food, though of course it got nothing on Binghe's mastery. But watching Yue Qingyuan cook is a lot like watching a guy figuring out a very important puzzle while missing half the pieces. He can't remember the man's origins being ever mentioned in *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* but it most certainly wasn't being the son of a chef.

Do cookbooks exist in this world?

Should Shen Yuan get his hands on one? Give it as a gift? He feels like Yue Qingyuan would appreciate that, because the dude *does* prefer to cook his own food, even though he's clearly still figuring it out.

… okay, maybe Shen Yuan shouldn't judge. He grimaces as he remembers the crunchy rice, and the fight that followed it. The rice hadn't been the cause but it can't have helped, either. If the food had been good, maybe they would have been too busy eating to- to-

Not that he's making rice.

He carefully puts the heavy teapot on the tray alongside the bowl of roasted nuts and the mandarin which Shen Yuan already peeled and split apart. There is also a teacup, and only

one, because he has to leave for Qing Jing Peak after he delivers it.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and picks up the tray; but cultivator strength, what little of it he has, helps him keep it all steady. Now he just has to avoid tripping over his own feet.

The journey to Yue Qingyuan's home office isn't too far. Two hallways and one right turn. He knows there's a bigger, fancier office in a separate building which Yue Qingyuan usually spends his time in for official sect business.

But this early, the man likes to tend to his duties at home.

Shen Yuan prefers this office to the other one- last time he was in it, he painted the stupid fan for Shen Qingqiu. He couldn't do *that* in the official office. There were, like, people there. With opinions.

Here, it was just him and Yue Qingyuan.

"Gege," Shen Yuan calls out and uses his finger to flick the door open with qi, accidentally slamming it open with too much force, "I'm leaving now, so-"

His voice dies in his throat and Shen Yuan freezes in the doorway.

Yue Qingyuan is sitting by his too long desk, scrolls of wood and paper neatly arranged, Xuan Su resting against its dedicated display behind him. He looks at Shen Yuan and smiles, but Shen Yuan can't spare him a smile back.

He's not alone.

Two women turn to look at him, and Shen Yuan's grasp on the tray tightens, a barely there rattle before he forces himself to relax.

"This one apologizes for interrupting," he says and bows his head.

"Xiao-Yuan did not interrupt," Yue Qingyuan replies, and there's the scraping of a chair being pushed back, "though this one does believe introductions are in order. This is Tang Qingling, Xi Jiao's Peak Lord, and Yi Qingsong, Lord of Long Sheng Peak."

"This humble one greets Shishu," Shen Yuan says and manages a polite smile as he looks up, torn between staring and bolting and extremely aware of how he's holding a tray of breakable things.

Yi Qingsong is a tall woman; as tall as Shen Qingqiu, he imagines, which is a feat in itself. She's thin, with pale skin and brown eyes, though he's surprised to see that there's actually frown lines visible. Barely there, but it makes her look like she's approaching her forties rather than remaining at the youthful appearance he's seen on the other Peak Lords.

The furrowed lines between her brows are the deepest, though that might be because she's frowning at him.

It reminds him of a stern librarian, if one ignores the bow on her back and the sword by her waist; her thick, brown hair has been pulled into a bun that only makes the comparison stronger, though her hair is kept in place with golden flowers that match the ones embroidered onto her dark green robes.

It's a fitting theme for the woman in charge of agriculture and scouting of Cang Qiong Mountain.

In comparison, Tang Qingling is the complete opposite.

She's short, perhaps around Binghe's current height, with wide shoulders and a round face. It's hard not to stare; not because of her height, but rather because of the scars.

Thick, ragged lines run from the corner of her mouth and all the way to the back of her head. It has pulled her lips into a permanent smirk, and the scars must have prevented her hair from growing back. Because she has an undercut on each side, framing the thick, long braid of black hair that falls all the way down to her waist. She *looks* like someone in charge of beasts, as much as she looks like she's not to be fucked with.

Black pants and high boots; steel gray robes that flutter as she steps closer, and Shen Yuan stands very, very still as Tang Qingling's dark eyes sweep over him, and he tries to not stare when he notices she's missing half of her pinky on her left hand as she gestures at him.

"Is this Shen Qingqiu's child?" she asks, and her voice has that bubbly quality he's more used to hearing from Ning Yingying, which is just so fucking weird.

"Shidi has not claimed such a relationship," Yue Qingyuan diplomatically replies, and now he stands close enough to take the tray from Shen Yuan's hands. It lets him hide them behind his back instead, which is a relief. He totally doesn't want the tray back to hide behind.

It's a tray. There's nothing that he *could* hide behind on it.

Yi Qingsong scoffs.

"And yet, Zhangmen-shixiong calls him *Xiao-Yuan,"* she says, derision dripping from her voice, and Shen Yuan wants to leave, "why is he here?"

"T-This one merely wished to bid farewell to… to Shibo, before leaving for his lessons," Shen Yuan says, barely not mumbling. "This one apologizes once more for interrupting."

"This one wouldn't call it interrupting," Tang Qingling says, "this is far more interesting. How old is Shizhi? Shen-shixiong must have had him *terribly* young, huh?"

She's so close. Within touching distance, and Shen Yuan watches as Yue Qingyuan puts the tray on his desk and tries his very best to ignore how the two women keep eyeing him. It feels like he is being picked apart, and- and he didn't…

It's not that he is a slob. Shen Yuan knows that. But with them standing so close, he half-expects one of them to reach out and tug at his hair and chide him for not taking care of it. Or to pinch his cheeks and coo that he should eat more. And he shouldn't be this fucking nervous. He thought- it's been *years,* he shouldn't–

He blames the nightmare.

Such fucking bullshit.

"This one wouldn't know," he forces out, nails digging into his palms and hands feeling too hot. Shen Yuan clears his throat. "Is- does gege, does- Shibo, that-" *fuck.*

"Gege?" Yi Qingsong repeats, and Shen Yuan wants to die when their eyes briefly meet, "Zhangmen-shixiong, honestly. If any of this one's disciples referred to a master in such a way… well, they would certainly *wish* they were on shovel duty once this master was done with them."

"Xiao-Yuan may call this one whatever he wants," Yue Qingyuan replies.

"Xiao-Yuan," Tang Qingling laughs and her hand pats Shen Yuan's shoulder. It doesn't hurt; it's a normal pat, the kind that Wei Qingwei has often given him. And yet, he flinches back, a gasp caught in his throat. Tang Qingling blinks, Yi Qingsong's eyes sharpen, and Shen Yuan would flush bright red if he wasn't too busy trying to breathe.

Black robes fill his vision, and Shen Yuan blinks and focuses onto the back of Yue Qingyuan, now standing between him and the two women.

"Xiao-Yuan needs to hurry to his lessons," Yue Qingyuan says in a firm voice that he only heard once before, "and Shimei had much to report, correct?"

"Is the child hurt?" Yu Qingsong asks, and Shen Yuan can't read her voice, her face hidden from view by Yue Qingyuan. Yue Qingyuan, who turns to look at Shen Yuan.

"He is not," the man says, and smiles, "but perhaps he should hurry, before his shixiong gets upset once again?"

Shen Yuan hopes he doesn't look as relieved as he feels; by the Yue Qingyuan's smile softens, he doesn't think he succeeded.

"Y-Yes. Thank you, gege," he blurts out, and flees before the two women can see how red his face is.

He should have stayed at Qiong Ding Peak.

Ming Fan would have been upset, but he wouldn't have fussed too much since it was the sect leader's peak. Shen Yuan could have spent a lovely day just hanging around Yue Qingyuan, being lazy and pretending very hard that he hadn't had a nightmare that still left him nauseous when he thought about it, or that he missed Binghe and even stupid Ning Yingying back when she wasn't angry–

Instead he is on Qing Jing Peak.

Running.

It's hard to run through the bamboo of Qing Jing Peak; it's the kind that grows more wild and separate, the ground covered with dried leaves and sticks. He's veering blindly, skidding half the time as he makes sharp turns in between where the bamboo grows thicker.

Behind him, disciples of Bai Zhan shout for the others to go faster.

Fuck.

He's only ever experienced the raids back at- well, at *Qing Jing.* Surrounded by buildings and fellow disciples, of masters making sure nothing goes too fucking far. With stone paths that are easy to run on, paths that all of them have memorized.

But of course he had to get into another argument with Ning Yingying. Because while she is upset, she can't do the cold shoulder like *mature* people, no, she has to needle and prod and argue and- and he had just wanted to be alone.

So instead of going to his and Binghe's tree, Shen Yuan had grabbed some fruit and snuck off to where no one ever went.

Of course Shen Yuan would stumble upon the idiots sneaking through the bamboo forest, trying to go for the ambush approach for once. He went to sit down like an idiot, only to look up and see six of them staring back at him.

At least Lin Jie hadn't been with them.

Shen Yuan jumps over a creek and stumbles on the landing. He throws out one arm to make the water splash backwards, and is rewarded with the sound of shrieks as cold mountain water lands on the idiots. He just has to run a little bit more, and then he will reach the downward hill that leads straight towards the pavilion which means he will be close enough for everyone else to join and stop him from getting his ass kicked.

Not that a little bit of *water* would stop the idiots of Bai Zhan.

He has barely been able to start running again before someone collides with him; Shen Yuan yelps, and then the air is knocked out of him as he lands with a *thud* on the ground, sliding as

it goes downwards. There's blood in his mouth- he thinks he bit the inside of his cheek on the landing, but he doesn't have time to focus on that.

"Got him!" the guy holding him down yells excitedly, and Shen Yuan wheezes and tries to squirm away. But he's a thin stick under a fucking *boulder,* the guy is so fucking heavy–

Shen Yuan can see the stupid pavilion from where he's laying. He can even see people by it. As he squints, he thinks it might even be Ning Yingying and Ming Fan.

They're so close and yet so very far away.

"Good job, Shidi," another says, "see, this one *knew* the spawn of Shen Qingqiu had to be easy once he's not hiding behind others!" And then he crouches down by his head, letting Shen Yuan see him.

He just looks like a dude, maybe a year or two older than Shen Yuan. Black hair, brown eyes, face the kind of blandly handsome that ensures he won't ever stand out. If one ignores the smug, shit-eating grin on his *stupid* face.

"Let me go," Shen Yuan spits.

"Trying to order us around? We do not have weak spines, unlike the rest of your peak," the boy mocks, and flicks Shen Yuan's brow hard enough to bruise, "and now you can't fight dirty, the way your master does!"

"Because six on one is *so* fair-"

Dirt fills his mouth as his face is shoved into the ground. Shen Yuan coughs and jerks away, heart in his throat. But it was only a shove; he can handle a shove, as long as no one *grabs.*

"Where's the rat?" the guy asks, barely audible as Shen Yuan tries to get rid of the gross taste on his tongue, feeling as if he is about to throw up from it.

Rat? Whose rat?

"He's with the others, distracting," the one holding him down says. Shen Yuan wonders if his wrists will have bruises; his arms are held behind his back, the grip firm. The other four crowd around, some of them poking at him with their feet. At least the fuckers aren't kicking.

It's just–

The day started out bad. Why does it keep getting *worse?*

"Shame," they laugh, "maybe we should just drag this guy around until we find him? He's always going on about how *he* will defeat Shen's Spawn, let's rub it in the little rat's face so that he will finally leave–"

A finger pokes Shen Yuan's cheek, and he does what he does best.

He bites.

The shout of pain startles the one on top of him; the grip on Shen Yuan's wrists loosens for just a moment, but he uses that moment to yank himself free and kicks the guy off of him.

"Shit!" the one who was mocking him yelps, and then, "catch him!" as Shen Yuan stumbles-runs down the hill, gritting his teeth. He does *not* want to eat dirt, fuck, shit, he does not want to faceplant and scrape his entire face off *please* let him stay on his feet, please, please–

As two of the boys collide into him, Shen Yuan makes a truly embarrassing sound, high-pitched and loud enough that he immediately wants to bite off his tongue for it. But as he goes back down, he sees the others down below look up, right before he eats dirt.

Everything hurts.

Because they didn't come to an immediate stop. Instead they kept sliding, knees and elbows digging into each other, the ground scraping at his cheek as he tried to get free. By the time they come to a stop, the others have caught up.

But, Shen Yuan thinks as he grimaces, so has *his* others.

"Let him go!" Ming Fan demands, "how dare you- this is shameful! Six on one? Get off of him!"

"We haven't broken any rules!" someone yells back, "our ambush worked! We took him out, fair and square!"

"Let him go or this one is telling Shi- is telling the masters!" Ning Yingying yells and stomps one foot.

Now, Shen Yuan doesn't *have* to have seen a lot of movies and read a lot of books to know that's the wrong thing to say in what's basically a hostage situation. He braces himself for the worst.

"Spineless! Just like your master," the guy from before taunts, "running over to beg for help? Try it! Before they get here, we will have beaten him enough to make up for it!"

Shen Yuan expects a kick or even a punch, something to really complete the schoolyard bully scenario; instead, his scalp stings as his hair is grabbed and his head yanked up harsh enough he bites his tongue. But the taste of blood is a distant thing in comparison to the nails scraping against his head, the way his hair is yanked until he's forced up onto his feet. Unable to even claw at the hand grabbing him, because another pins his wrists to his back.

It's suddenly very hard to breathe.

Ming Fan looks horrified.

Ning Yingying–

“Don’t touch A-Yuan’s hair!” she shrieks.

“This one isn’t going to take orders from some baby thinking she’s Qing Jing’s *little princess–”*

There’s a wet crunch; Shen Yuan stumbles forward, only saved from face planting a third time because of Ming Fan catching him. He twists to see what happened, and stares wide-eyed at the scene before him.

The guy who had been holding him is now clutching at a clearly broken nose. The others backed up out of pure shock, staring at the girl trembling before them. Ning Yingying’s knuckles are red from the impact, her fists clenched so hard that they’re trembling.

“I’m not *a baby!”* she screams.

And then she kicks the guy in the nuts.

Chapter End Notes

SY, wearing a shirt saying 'No Fear': I am Totally getting over my trauma! I'm so cool! So mature! I'm handling everything SO WELL!!!
Peak Lords: Yes Hello, we are Women.
SY:
SY, now wearing a shirt saying 'One Fear': gege help

Yay!!! I made it despite allergies :D
birch pollen sucks btw
Also I should add- I'm pretty sure the Peak Names are borrowed from Tossawary? I remember trying to find good inspiration for future Peak Names, put in some placeholders and then... I forgot to make up my own. So if any seem familiar despite not being canon, that is why!

btw, here's a question. What would you guys consider a crossover? For me, it is when the worlds literally crossover full isekai style, but I've seen that what I would call an AU sometimes gets called a crossover also. Just curious :D

Have a good day <3

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Ming Fan first became a disciple of Cang Qiong Mountain, Ning Yingying was already the Xiao-Shimei of Qing Jing Peak.

He had been eleven and she had been eight and a half years old, always peeking out from behind Shen Qingqiu's robes during lessons she was too young to attend. She was all chubby cheeks and ribbons, bright smiles and bright eyes. Ming Fan was the second son and the third born of a well-off merchant family, and he knew that cute girls were to be spoiled and adored, just like his own older sister had been back home. Cute daughters were precious, unlike second sons.

Treating Ning Yingying like the little princess she was, was very easy. With her charming personality and appearance, how could he not? Besides, it made Shizun happy! And everyone liked it when Shizun was in a good mood.

And now–

Now he stares in horror as she throws dirt in one boy's eyes before kicking a second one in the crotch. There's screaming and yelling, profanities *not* suitable for Qing Jing Peak bombarding his ears as everything goes very bad, very quickly.

Ming Fan should interfere.

He is the head disciple! The one currently in charge, after all! But- well. Shen Yuan *does* seem a little weak in the knees, the brat clearly in need of Ming Fan's support, fists clutching at his robes. And Ning Yingying isn't *alone;* other disciples have joined the scuffle, what once was a hostage situation now quickly becoming the kind of fight that has Ming Fan shuffling backwards, dragging Shen Yuan with him as they avoid thrown objects and errant fists.

"What the fuck," Shen Yuan says, and Ming Fan pinches his ear.

"Language," he scolds, and ignores Shen Yuan's glare when something much, much worse is yelled from the cloud of horrible fighting. He has other things to focus on! Important things! The brat has no right to make that face, after having been ambushed by their rivals! Ming Fan should scold him for that, really, but he's being very nice today. "Is disciple Shen injured? Did those heathens break any bones?"

"No, this one is fine-"

"Well, stand on your own then," Ming Fan snaps and helps Shen Yuan stand up properly, patting him down, getting rid of errant twigs and leaves and dust clinging to his robes, "ugh,

you need a change of clothes, this is shameful. A disciple of Qing Jing Peak should *never* look as if they have rolled in the dirt!"

Shen Yuan scowls; it's not at all as demanding of respect as Shizun's glare is, and so Ming Fan scowls back, before he looks back to the fight. Just in time to catch some *hooligan* grabbing Ning Yingying's hair and punching her right in the face, and that is just- that is not acceptable!

"Stop!" he yells, shoving Shen Yuan to the side to march up, using the scabbard of Yin Tian to whack the guy over the head, "that is *it!* Go back to Bai Zhan, we are *done* for today! Do *not* grab this one!? This one is the head disciple of Qing Jing, you are not to even touch me, your filthy-" he most definitely does not squawk as he barely avoids a punch of his own. "Disrespectful!"

"We don't take orders from Qing Jing!" the guy yells.

"You should!" Ning Yingying screams and headbutts him.

Ming Fan feels faint.

By the time he has managed to chase off the bastards, it's too late. He looks upon his fellow disciples. Their uniforms are dirty and torn, their bodies covered in bruises. Ning Yingying has lost her orange ribbons.

He watches in horror as she spits to the side and wipes at her bloody nose. She looks nothing like the little girl he remembers having to coax into practicing calligraphy with the promise of sweet treats as a reward, and Ming Fan despairs.

"Xiao-Shimei should sit," he says, and the girl grumbles but joins Shen Yuan on the bench that the brat had sat down on at some point during it all. The boy sits awkwardly, looking *far* better off than poor Ning Yingying, who needs all of her clothes replaced.

They are beyond saving; one sleeve has a long rip in it, going all the way up to her shoulder. What kind of parents did those brats have, to think tearing at a girl's clothes was at all acceptable?

Ming Fan brings out a handkerchief and begins to clean her face.

Oh, it's going to be *so* swollen. Surely the healers will make an exception for minor injuries and heal it instantly? Surely the bruised face of Ning Yingying requires some intervention? If Shizun finds out–

"Xiao-shimei didn't need to join," Ming Fan says, "she should have let her Shixiongs handle it! Look, Shimei is going to be in so much pain later! Don't worry, this one will provide cooling talismans to lessen the swelling. Shidi," he then snaps, and prods at Shen Yuan's foot with his own, "be grateful! Tell Xiao-shimei that you are thankful for her help!"

The two of them look at each other.

Their fight is well-known across the peak, and Ming Fan has absolutely no idea what it's about. He thought it was about food, and then it had seemed to instead be about Luo Binghe, which had made no sense at all. Not that Ming Fan gossips, of course. That is not something a head disciple should do.

It's just his duty to make sure he *knows* the gossip, that is all.

He crosses his arms and taps his foot and watches as Ning Yingying and Shen Yuan stare at each other, both bruised. All around them, their fellow disciples are wiping themselves off, readjusting their uniforms and limping away to get treatment. Not that they deserve any, for failing to protect Ning Yingying from those brutes.

The brat wrinkles his nose. Ning Yingying's eyes narrow.

And then she huffs, which makes more blood dribble out of her nose.

"A-Yuan should go and get this one a jar of pickled cucumbers," she says as Ming Fan hurries forward to clean her up once more, making sure he's gentle as he presses the cloth to her nose. "As a *thank you* to his Shijie."

It comes out muffled, the handkerchief in the way. Shen Yuan bristles, the little brat, as if it's not a perfectly reasonable demand of gratitude. Well, perhaps not the pickles. That is a bit odd, though Ming Fan wouldn't say that outloud, of course. Ning Yingying deserves everything she wants. That is simply the rule of Qing Jing Peak.

"You-" Shen Yuan snarls, and Ming Fan reaches out to flick his forehead. The boy yelps and clutches at his head.

"Do as you're told," Ming Fan orders, "don't you see that your Shijie is bleeding? Go! Get her some snacks!"

"It's not this one's fault that she–"

Ming Fan flicks Shen Yuan's forehead again; and then quickly yanks his hand back when the brat snaps his teeth in response.

"Shidi!" he scolds, because *really!* He knows the brat grew up on the streets, but surely he wasn't raised by the dogs living on it too!?

"Ugh! Fine!" Shen Yuan hisses and gets onto his feet, stomping away as if he is attempting to make the whole mountain crumble down. Ming Fan glares after him, and then returns to taking care of the poor girl before him, the handkerchief more red than white by the time he's done.

Ning Yingying is pouting. It makes more blood well up from her split lip, and Ming Fan despairs. Her cute face is a swollen mess, and he truly does hope the healers will treat it. Bruises are generally not considered important enough to heal but it *is* Ning Yingying.

“When did Xiao-Shimei start liking pickled cucumbers?” he asks, “this Shixiong is so proud that she is widening her palate!” Ming Fan then praises.

Ning Yingying swats away his hands.

“No, they’re still gross,” she says.

… Ming Fan clears his throat.

“Perhaps Xiao-shimei should go to the baths,” he suggests. “This Shixiong will fetch her new robes, hm?”

“Yingying can do it herself,” she says in a very sulky tone, “this one is going to wait for Shidi.”

Ming Fan looks at her. Ning Yingying refuses to meet his eyes.

Is this what happens to girls when they grow up, he wonders as he slowly backs away. Did Shizun know? Is that why he is in the caves? The man is wise and powerful, it would most certainly make sense. Does that mean there will be a repeat, once Chen Xiaoling grows older?

He hopes not.

“... this one will return later,” he promises.

“Whatever!”

Ming Fan decides that he really does need to leave.

“She doesn’t even *like* pickles,” Shen Yuan snarls to himself as he walks, sticking to one side of the path and furiously ignoring the looks sent his way as he passes others of the peak, “I bet she’s doing it as revenge. For- for the rice, or- or for calling her a *child,* even though she’s fucking acting like one–!”

“Language,” Master Ling says.

“This one apologizes,” he replies, and hurries away before he can be called out for saying it through gritted teeth. Thankfully, the old woman is too busy with her game of go to bother chasing him.

Shen Yuan keeps his mouth shut as he continues to walk through the winding paths of Qing Jing Peak, down the gray stairs and up the hills, leaving the pavilion and its pond of fish and sulking Ning Yingying behind. His skin is crawling and his scalp still stings, even though everything should have faded by now. It's stupid. He flexes his fingers and shakes his head, and slows his steps as he approaches his final destination.

The storage is a shed right next to the kitchens. There are several sheds, but only one of them stores all the jars of delicious fermentations. It looks mundane. Nice and normal, absolutely nothing wrong with it.

Shen Yuan pauses by the door and smooths out the wrinkles in his robes. He lingers, and it's stupid. It's just- with all of today, he can't help but remember the very last time he entered this shed.

He had been twelve. Zhao De hadn't been kicked out yet.

Shen Yuan shakes his head.

"It's just a shed," he mutters, "it's just a shed, and no one would- it's *fine.* A-Ying wants pickles, she will get her stupid pickles."

He slams the door open before he can change his mind, only to wince as it makes the shelves rattle. The light is dim within, the sunlight cutting a sharp contrast against the dark interior. Shelves line the walls, all of them burdened by ceramic jars carefully sorted by their contents.

It's easy to step inside. He definitely doesn't want to put a rock by the door to keep it open, nope, nu-huh. Shen Yuan has no problem letting the door fall shut behind him as he steps into the dark space.

He takes a shuddering breath as the darkness settles in. It's not even that dark, honestly. Talismans faintly glow in the corners of the shed, just enough to offer a sense of light, to let him read the labels to see what each jar contains, cultivation eyesight coming in clutch. It's fine.

None of the shelves close to the door have cucumbers.

Shen Yuan steels himself and goes further in. He forgot how cramped the space is; the shelves line the walls, but they also form their very own tiny labyrinth. It was cramped when he was much smaller than he is now, and now he's half-afraid he will stumble and knock it all down.

A turn towards a small alcove, made to store the jars too big for shelves. There are likely no cucumbers, but he still wants to make sure. So Shen Yuan steps forward and then he sees eyes glinting in the corner, too close to the floor to be human and too big to be a rat.

Shen Yuan screams and leaps backward, the shelves rattling in warning when he stumbles

into them. Heart beating and sparks dancing at his fingertips, Shen Yuan holds his hand out, palm forward, and shakily lets the light of those sparks cast shadows into the alcove.

Hunched and cradling a smaller jar, is Lin Jie.

The smaller boy stares at him and he stares back. There are cheeks bulging with food, and the flickering of Shen Yuan's sparking hands makes the boy look oddly phantasmal, his pale skin and hair and pink pupils not doing much to beat the ghost allegations.

Shen Yuan's fingers curl inwards. Lin Jie hugs the jar closer to himself and inches backwards, further into his little corner between the large containers he had been hiding by.

The movement snaps him out of it. Shen Yuan blinks and lets the glow die down, hands still trembling from the shock. But now when he knows that Lin Jie is there, Shen Yuan can still see the silhouette of the boy. There's a crunching sound, and he faintly wonders what Lin Jie is eating, hiding in the dark like that.

"... why is Shidi here?" he asks.

He isn't surprised when there's no response.

Shen Yuan looks back towards the door. There is no one nearby, no one who can see what he's doing. There is only them- and Ning Yingying has always been bad at keeping time. She won't know if he is taking too long, as long as he shows up with what she wanted.

He gets closer; the glint of Lin Jie's eyes track him, all the way until he's just barely out of reach, where he then sits down. The floor is cold, seeping through his robes. The silence is awkward, and only made more so when Lin Jie continues to eat.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

How is he able to just keep eating??? If *Shen Yuan* had been caught stealing food, holy shit. He would have died on the spot from mortification. Though–

Though he remembers being so hungry that he almost tried to eat tree bark. It had been after he managed to leave Lady Jia's household, on the way to Cang Qiong Mountain. No one wants to feed a scruffy child with no money; and the road had been long and winding through the wilderness, the System doing its worst at being a guide.

This close, it's easier to see Lin Jie, and the way that the boy keeps watching him even as he stuffs his mouth full. He's covered in bruises again; he always is, of course, but these look brand new. There's a split lip. It must sting every time he chews.

Shen Yuan had hoped giving the boy some proper food would have helped. But maybe it was worse than he had thought, on Bai Zhan Peak? It didn't seem like there were a lot of rules there.

Then again… Bai Zhan Peak never picked out disciples. You have to climb the mountain

yourself, and on a peak that prides itself on their battle prowess…

Bullying, Shen Yuan knows, is universal. But how much worse can it get, if you weren't even picked by a peak lord? If you were tiny and weak and a bit weird, and had to climb all the way yourself?

He presses a hand to the back of his neck, the lotus branded into his skin now faint and barely visible, but still easy to trace with the tip of his fingers if he wanted to.

What kind of treatment would it have gotten him, on Bai Zhan?

"Can I please heal Shidi?" Shen Yuan asks, and Lin Jie stops chewing. The silence is almost comical with how sudden it is, and Lin Jie's eyes are wide, one hand frozen half-way out of the jar, the juices from the pickled cucumber dripping down. That will be difficult to explain to Ning Yingying, though she hates pickled cucumbers so–

Oh.

Shen Yuan's heart feels weirdly tight. He smiles, and moves his hand away from his nape and offers it instead to Lin Jie, whose eyes dart towards it, then back to his face.

"I know you don't like being touched," Shen Yuan continues, "but I promise to only heal you, nothing else. You can bite me if I lie."

"... you're not talking the same," the boy says.

"What do you mean?"

"Not- not fancy," Lin Jie mutters, "this one, that one. Fancy."

"I'm not actually that fancy," Shen Yuan says, and Lin Jie scoffs. "It's true! I… I used to be a servant, years ago. It sucked."

Lin Jie's lips twitch. It's almost a smile.

"I had to talk fancy then, and people like it when I talk fancy here too. But Shidi is like me, yes? You're not fancy either. So I don't need to talk fancy when we're alone, do I?"

"You're not like me," Lin Jie protests, looking very offended, "I'm strong!"

Wow, ouch.

"I can blow things up with my hands," Shen Yuan counters.

"No you can't."

"I so can," he says, "I would prove it, but I don't want to break anything in here. Shidi will just have to trust me. Just like you can trust me to heal you, if you let me."

“... and I’ll bite you if you don’t heal me,” Lin Jie says. Which was not at all what Shen Yuan said earlier, but he would take it. So he nods, and then gets to watch as Lin Jie shuffles forward. Slow as a snail, the large ceramic jar scraping against the floor as he drags it over with him.

He does wonder how old the boy actually is. Twelve, maybe? A small twelve year old? Maybe even thirteen. The way he talks doesn’t help at all; if the boy is as feral as Shen Yuan thinks, then it makes sense that he never bothered to figure out words properly. Not until now. But it makes him sound younger than he might actually be; each sentence sounding like a missed bite, words chopped up and awkward. Though something tells him that not even Lin Jie knows his own age.

“Thank you,” Shen Yuans says once Lin Jie is close enough, “now, I’ll put my hand on your skin, alright? Is it okay if I put it on your face? I can also hold your hand, or if you’re more hurt elsewhere-”

“Face,” Lin Jie cuts in, and then he braces himself.

“Face it is,” Shen Yuan replies, and only once Lin Jie stops bracing for a hit that never comes, Shen Yuan very, very slowly presses his hand against one bruised cheek.

He is always so surprised when people feel warm.

Lin Jie is no different; the boy doesn’t fade away like the ghost that Ning Yingying accuses him of being, and he’s not as cold as he looks. He’s just normal. Warm, soft skin that’s uneven with the swelling of bruises and lingering scratches. Shen Yuan closes his eyes and focuses.

The meridians are a mess, he thinks, and urges the flow to stabilize, to redirect to where healing needs to speed up. Lin Jie’s golden core is underdeveloped but existing. Shen Yuan skirts by it as he nudges meridians back into position, as he untangles webs and cracks. He doesn’t dare to do too much, not daring to heal the scratches or fully dive into straightening out the tangled mess, and he definitely doesn’t dare to poke at the two bruised ribs he finds, but–

But he feels secure in lessening it all. In making it all just a little easier.

Shen Yuan blinks his eyes open for what feels like an eternity later. The floor is still cold and the boy is still hugging the jar close. But some time during the healing, Lin Jie began to lean into the hand on his cheek.

It kind of feels like when a cat nuzzles.

Shen Yuan bites back a giggle, because he just *knows* that would earn him a bite. Lin Jie’s eyes are closed and his face is free of bruises; it would be stupid to mess up the peace that they somehow gained.

“All done,” Shen Yuan says, and Lin Jie doesn’t react for a moment. When he does, it’s him jerking backwards, nearly toppling over with the force of it. Shen Yuan manages to steady him, and feels a burst of joy when the boy doesn’t immediately flinch away at it.

Once he is certain that the boy won’t fall over, Shen Yuan pulls his hands back.

“Does Shidi need help going back to his peak?” he asks, and Lin Jie scowls. The boy touches his own face, poking at where there used to be bruises. When Lin Jie fails to find any pain, he stares for an awkwardly long moment, pale blue eyes looking like large marbles as they catch the faint glow of the storage’s talismans.

“Don’t need help,” Lin Jie says, and then shoves a cucumber into Shen Yuan’s hand. It’s slimy and cold, nearly slipping through his fingers before he gets over the shock and holds it properly. “Eat,” Lin Jie snaps.

Shen Yuan eats, and ducks his head to hide his smile.

Ning Yingying is still by the bench.

One leg pulled up, arms wrapped around it. Her uniform is still ripped and dirtied, and even from where Shen Yuan is standing, he can see that her bruises will rival the ones he just healed on Lin Jie. Her ribbons are missing, braided buns undone, and for the first time his fingers twitch as he takes in the mess before him.

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and begins to walk again.

“Shijie,” he says, startling her out of her daydreams, which is too bad, because he honestly has no clue what else to say. They stare awkwardly at each other. Ning Yingying sits, and Shen Yuan stands.

A gust of wind blows Ning Yingying’s hair into her face right as she opens her mouth, and he gets the pleasure of watching her cough and wheeze because of it. Shen Yuan bites back a laugh, and pulls out a white ribbon from his pockets, handing it over.

“Here,” he says, “Shijie knows this one always carries spares.”

“Blegh,” Ning Yingying replies, or something to that effect. Still, she accepts the ribbon and ties her hair back into a ponytail as Shen Yuan sits down next to her. Her hair is as long as his is now; maybe he should give ponytails a try, instead of loosely tying back whatever ended up in his face.

Shen Yuan taps his fingers against his knees.

"... this one couldn't get the pickles," he finally says, "did- did A-Ying know that the storage is haunted?"

"This one might've seen a ghost in there, maybe," Ning Yingying says, crossing her arms and turning her face away. Shen Yuan can still see her pouting, though, and–

And he *really* looks at her.

Ning Yingying is fifteen years old, a whole year older than him and Binghe. Two years they have known each other, and while he still remembers the crawling, itchy discomfort of being near her at the beginning, now… now it's gone. And here they sit, with his ribbon in her hair, with her stubbornly chubby cheeks bruised. There's drying blood underneath her nose still. Her knuckles, when he glances at them, are red from the earlier fight.

"Thank you," he blurts out, and when she whips her head around to stare at him, Shen Yuan hurriedly turns away to hide his burning cheeks, "for- you know."

For not selling out Lin Jie. For punching the guy who grabbed his hair. For many other things that Shen Yuan can't list right now.

"Well- the ghost looked hungry," Ning Yingying says, slow and reluctant. An admission and an apology, maybe, if Shen Yuan wants to poke at it. It's tempting, but he's kind of tired of arguing, and poking might lead to more of it.

Instead he nods, and they sit and stew in awkward silence once more.

Finally, he clears his throat.

"Shijie can really throw a punch," he says.

Ning Yingying startles; and then she grins.

"This one had to protect her Shidi," she says, puffing up her chest, "to remind him that she is his *Shijie!* And not a *Shimei."*

Shen Yuan blinks at her.

"What?"

"This one isn't a *baby."*

Shen Yuan's eyes flick down towards the very real proof that she is, uh, not a baby. That she is, in fact, very much growing up. Ning Yingying smacks his arm.

"Hey!" he protests and swats her hand away, "what! This one agrees, Shijie is not a baby *or* a Shimei!"

“Good! Shidi must promise to- to not act like Dashixiong–”

“Ming Fan? Of course not,” Shen Yuan huffs, “he acts like this one can’t even walk without breaking a leg, or like I’ll get a concussion from breathing too hard.”

“He won’t let me do any chores besides laundry and sweeping,” Ning Yingying whines, “nothing sweaty at all!”

Shen Yuan frowns.

“But A-Ying doesn’t even *want* to do those kinds of chores.”

“That’s beside the point!”

“Is it???”

“Yes!”

They look at each other; Shen Yuan’s lips twitch. The laughter comes suddenly, a wave of mirth cascading over them; giggles spilling forth, shoulders bumping as they absolutely lose it. When Ming Fan briefly stops to stare, arms full with folded uniforms, they are near tears from laughter.

“... alright,” Ming Fan says suspiciously, slowly putting down a uniform for each of them on the bench, before he carefully backs away.

It only makes them laugh harder.

“Shijie,” Shen Yuan says as he smoothes out his newly changed uniform, “may this Shidi ask for assistance in an exorcism?”

“Exorcism?” Ning Yingying echoes, looking up from where she is wrapping her knuckles. Shen Yuan had offered to heal her, but the girl had rejected the idea.

He thinks she might be a little too proud about looking like a mess.

Shen Yuan glances around them, before he leans in to whisper. There is no one around, but it doesn’t hurt to be *careful.* Also it makes it feel more fun, maybe, to act sneaky about it.

“Shidi is still in the shed,” he admits, “this one wasn’t sure how to get him out of the peak

without being noticed. But if Shijie could help…?”

Ning Yingying slowly grins so wide that he is abruptly reminded of the cheshire cat. Which he thinks might actually exist in this world, though obviously it can’t talk, but he swear he remembers Binghe having to catch one to complete some kind of quest- wait, fuck, he’s getting distracted. Ning Yingying is grinning too much.

“Of course, A-Yuan,” she says, and claps her hands excitedly, “of course!”

He squints at her, already having regrets.

There is a crate involved.

He doesn’t want to think about the rest of it; he’s just happy that neither of them tripped down any of the stairs, accidentally launching Lin Jie towards a certain death. What matters is that they managed to deliver the crate to the rainbow bridge.

Dignity may have become a lost cause, but Shen Yuan had kind of given up on that, anyway. One can only step on so many rakes. So what if people stared at them as they carried a suspiciously rattling crate? No one stopped them! For some reason!

“Is that enough water?” Shen Yuan asks, an hour later.

Ning Yingying looks down; the water looks cloudy, hiding the rice from view. It is impossible to tell just how much water there actually is.

“How does one know?” she asks.

You think I fucking know??? Shen Yuan thinks, watching as the water swirls in the pot, like a mist of… of white. It doesn’t look right, but maybe it is? Does rice just… shed? White? When wet? Or something?

He isn’t certain how they ended up back in the bamboo house’s kitchen. No, that is a lie. They are in the bamboo house because they can’t risk others seeing what they are doing. They are in the kitchen because they are going to cook.

One pot of rice.

One. Single. Pot. Of. Rice.

“We must do this,” he says, “we only have one shot at it. Maybe more water is right? Should-

should we add more water?”

“A-Yuan has seen A-Luo cook. What does he usually do?” she asks.

Fuck. What *does* Binghe do when he cooks? Normally Shen Yuan is sitting and reading nearby, or setting the table or something. He likes to watch Binghe cut things up, or toss the food around in the pan. But rice? Rice is boring to watch. He can’t remember shit about *rice.*

“... I think he sticks a finger in? For some reason?”

Ning Yingying sticks her index finger into the water. They both stare for a moment, as if this simple gesture will magically reveal something of importance. The water remains white. The rice remains unseen.

“Maybe he uses qi,” Ning Yingying suggests.

“Wha- no, definitely not! He’s been cooking rice forever, since before we could do any- there’s no way he uses qi for this.”

“A-Yuan uses qi for silly things *all the time!”*

“I do not!”

“Lighting candles? Blowing out candles? Make wind blow when it’s warm, dry your hair, your clothes–”

“Okay, alright, shut up! I still don’t think Binghe uses qi when he cooks,” he protests, and then he pushes her away to stick his own finger in the pot. It’s cold, and he can feel the rice against his first knuckle.

… *should* they use qi?

Maybe to make it boil faster? Not that they have lit a fire yet. But perhaps that is one way to avoid another disaster? Just- warm it up without risking burning the house down. Shen Yuan frowns down at it.

“We have to do this,” he says, reminding himself of the importance. If they can just manage to cook one pot of rice, that means they can repeat it. They can cook for Binghe when he returns, and have a *nice* dinner together. Without fighting. They just have to make good rice.

“We *will* do this,” Ning Yingying says, and Shen Yuan nods.

They ended up trying qi and–

Who needs rice anyway? It's just messy! Messy to clean off the walls, the ceiling, the floor, themselves. Clearly it is not worth it. *Clearly* Binghe would be much happier if they didn't do anything in the kitchen ever again. And this is all about making Binghe happy.

"Can't we just sword fight instead?" Ning Yingying says, picking rice out of her hair. Shen Yuan wishes he could use qi to make it go faster for himself. Sadly, he has no clue how to expel hundreds of tiny white grains that are still soggy with water.

"Sword fight?" he asks, grimacing as he twists his head, trying to see if there's rice left in his hair. Bronze mirrors suck. Of all the things that Airplane could have kept in…

"It's more fun," she says, "and no one *ever* fights us properly! They always hold back! And we can do it secretly, and surprise them when we become swordmasters!"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to deny such claims; and then he closes it, because sadly she is right. Ning Yingying always kicks his ass no problem, which fucking sucks, but the rest?

And he *has* seen the others hold back with her too.

"... we should use training swords," he reluctantly says, "especially if we're doing it secretly. I don't know how to heal more than bruises."

Ning Yingying grins; it really never bodes well, does it?

But Shen Yuan finds himself smiling back despite that.

Chapter End Notes

SY & NYY, carrying a crate: don't be suspicious, don't be suspicious! Don't be suspicious-
The Rest of the Peak: ... If I Do Not See It, It Is Not My Problem.

Yaaay!!! Friendship established. :D
Two problems solved, how many left to go...?

I had a great time writing this chapter, and I hope you guys had a great time reading it!

Now, I'll try my best to update on schedule as normal, but Easter is approaching, which means I have a lot to do at work, plus family stuff. So while I'll hopefully be able to update two mondays from now, I dare make no promises. Just a warning <3

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cang Qiong Mountain is breathtaking.

Years ago, Luo Binghe looked up towards those misty peaks. They had seemed so mysterious and strange, ethereal with how one could never see the whole mountain in one glance. He remembers Shen Yuan being in awe as well; both of them gaping up at the sight, so large even though they had climbed so many stairs. They had nearly forgotten to dig the holes, a pointed cough from an older disciple reminding them.

Cang Qiong Mountain is still a beautiful sight, a humbling thing to witness, surrounded by grasslands and fields and rivers. And yet, Luo Binghe doesn't feel awe so much as he feels relief.

Home, he thinks, as they bid farewell to the disciples of Xi Jiao Peak, having helped with delivering their bounties to the peak lord who, frankly, looks quite intimidating despite her short stature.

He briefly entertains visiting the horses, just to bring news of Bao back to Yuan. Xi Jiao Peak is much lower and flatter than Qing Jing, one step above Long Sheng's bountiful fields. It's quite a trip to get to the stables- especially if you've been told to stay put. But in the end, the giggling girls of Xi Jiao are too much to bother with.

Luo Binghe flies behind Heng He.

Zheng Yang is a bright sword, catching the sunlight every time Luo Binghe shifts his stance. He's aware of how much the blade wants to fly faster, *more,* to make swoops in the air. Sometimes he wonders how he managed to get such a youthful spirit of a blade.

But despite Zheng Yang's urging, Luo Binghe knows better than to fly ahead of Heng He and the others. So he stays where he is, only doing little swerves when he thinks no one is looking, happy to take in the sight of his home in the bright summer sun, with its glinting rooftops and shimmering rainbow bridges.

Qing Jing Peak is as peaceful as always when they finally land in the courtyard. Ming Fan does a double-take from where he is scolding Chen Xiaoling, clearly not expecting them back so soon, before he descends upon them with his screeching voice.

Shen Yuan is nowhere to be seen.

He feels disappointed, and knows it is silly to be so. Their arrival is right around the time most of the classes have ended. Shen Yuan might already be gone, off to Qiong Ding or Qian Cao Peak. They arrived three whole days early because Luo Binghe managed to find a nest of

newly hatched vipers, a whole twenty of them. The hardest part of their mission would have been to catch live specimens- needed for the venom, he had been told- but with twenty of them, that number had been drastically reduced.

Ning Yingying isn't anywhere to be seen, either. Though considering how things were left off, that might be a good thing.

Luo Binghe sneaks off as Ming Fan demands a report from Heng He, sidestepping the other disciples and quickly ducking out of the courtyard and shares a small smile with Chen Xiaoling who decided to do the same. The little girl giggles, before she scrambles off, no doubt to hide from Ming Fan's toothless threats and chores she might be assigned.

Sweaty from the long trip, from riding a sword in broad daylight during the height of summer, Luo Binghe wipes at his brow. He wonders when he will be able to avoid being so sweaty, like the masters of the sect- it seems to be a trait of high cultivation. Like avoiding being cold, or sick.

He *hates* being sweaty.

As it is, puberty makes him feel filthy. Perhaps it's good that Shen Yuan has already left for the day; it means that Luo Binghe can wash himself off before his best friend sees him. And no Ning Yingying means he doesn't have to avoid being hugged as well, for fear of dirtying his Shijie's robes. Not that she ever cares about such things.

The baths are not empty- it is late, but not so late that the disciples are using them, the sun only having just begun its descent, still fully visible in the sky.
Instead only the masters are there, the ones who are old enough to want to retire early. Luo Binghe makes himself small to avoid disturbing them, folding his dirty clothes and putting them next to the clean ones he brought, pouch carefully set on top just in case.

The masters sit in the warm bath; Luo Binghe for once wants the cold one, the summer heat more than enough for him. Thankfully it is also empty. He breathes in before dipping his head below the surface to get all of his hair wet in one go. Luo Binghe surfaces and grimaces, wiping water away from his eyes. The chill *is* refreshing, but he always hates getting water in his eyes. It stings.

"–at least those two youngsters aren't causing such a disturbance every day now," he hears one of them grumble, an old man who he thinks might be the husband of Master Ling. His back is towards the elders, but Luo Binghe slows his scrubbing to listen as the man continues, "though instead they are always sneaking off. Trouble, those two."

"Has anyone sent them to Qian Cao Peak for the *talk?"* another wonders, "not proper, for a boy and girl to sneak off. They *are* of that age, are they not?

What?

"Hmpf. With all the time that boy spends with Lord Mu, one certainly hopes at least *he* has been told of such things. Of course, with how Xiao-Ning is…"

What.

Luo Binghe continues to clean himself, mind whirling. Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying, sneaking off? For what? It cannot be to visit Shang Qinghua, that is too far away and too noticeable. And even if they were, why would *Yuan* let *Ning Yingying* come along? Were they not fighting?

Did it resolve itself?

He squeezes the water out of his hair, feeling...

It is good that they have resolved things. It is. Luo Binghe's eyes linger on the pouch he left on top of his clothes. It's good that they found common ground, and became friends again, without his help.

But the way the masters are talking. Luo Binghe knows of… such matters. His mother was careful to tell him of such things, of keeping him out of sight of the nobles she worked for. By then he had already known what to look out for on the streets before she took him in, and after she left him, Luo Binghe knew what to avoid, knew to smear dirt onto his face to avoid the dangerous kind of attention as he traveled.

They *are* fourteen; two years away from marriageable age, one for Ning Yingying. He worries at his lip, chest feeling tight.

The idea of Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying exploring such things feels strange, though he knows that the older disciples certainly *do* explore those kinds of things, and he knows that some started around his age. Luo Binghe has overheard talks more than once, the kind of lurid gossip that made him blush and avoid meeting the eyes of his Shixiongs.

But *Yuan* and *Ning Yingying?*

Shen Yuan doesn't even like girls. He hates being near women as much as he tries to hide it from everyone else, and they were so angry with each other last time Luo Binghe saw them. Surely they wouldn't- not without– that is, not that he would want… but–

Luo Binghe dries himself off and gets dressed as neatly as he can, fingers feeling clumsy and mind in a daze. The pouch hangs from his belt, now a heavy weight unlike before.

Is it possible that Shen Yuan is still on Qing Jing Peak?

The bamboo house is empty. So is their tree, his and Shen Yuan's. They are not by the pond either, or by the classrooms or even the training yards, and if he can't find *either* of them, then they must be together. He wishes he knew how to send shortburst messages- but they are too young for those, and they require precision to reach the right person even if he did know how to send them, and Luo Binghe feels skittish and jumpy and not at all like he could possibly do so.

They *wouldn't,* would they?

Not even Binghe is allowed to touch Shen Yuan's hair. And… and exploring such things- how would one even avoid touching- it looks so *nice and soft,* how– there is no way! Though of course, he wants his Yuan to be happy. Obviously. And such things make people happy, in the stories that Shen Yuan loves to read.

Luo Binghe doesn't even realize he's wandered off the paths until a shriek snaps him out of it. He is running before he knows it, heart beating wildly as he rushes through the bamboo forest.

He bursts into a clearing, and feels his heart stutter at the sight.

There, in the middle, is Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying. The girl is on her back, face flushed, hair a mess. Pinned down and squirming, her voice loud and yet, he can't hear the words as he stares.

Shen Yuan is pinning her down.

He looks smug; a vicious grin on his face, green eyes glinting, his face pink and his robes scuffed, as if someone has been pulling on them. He looks victorious and so happy, so *confident,* poking his pink tongue out in a mocking display and- and–

The moment passes; both of them look up as Luo Binghe stumbles to a halt, the whole thing over in a second.

They all stare at each other in frozen surprise, Luo Binghe's chest feeling tight, feeling like something is clawing at him from within, feeling like there is acid bubbling in the back of his mouth, and this feeling is something he knows, he has felt it so often before, but never like *this.* Jealousy and envy is an ugly thing that he pretends he doesn't know better than he knows joy, because a cultivator is meant to be good and just.

But it *is* jealousy. Jealousy at how Shen Yuan's fingers squeeze around Ning Yingying's wrists, at how his hair falls down and brushes against her just briefly, swaying in the wind.

Binghe wants–

And then Shen Yuan's face lights up; the smugness replaced by bright joy, and Luo Binghe watches in a daze as the other boy leaps up, as Shen Yuan runs towards him, black hair flowing like black silk behind him, and then Binghe's arms are full with Yuan.

"Binghe!" he says, arms around Binghe, and Luo Binghe doesn't hug him back so much as he clings to him, heartbeat not slowing down at all.

If anything, he feels like it is beating faster *now* than when he was running. Now, with his face against Shen Yuan's neck, the scent of fresh grass and *Yuan* filling his nose, with Shen Yuan's thin arms around him and pale hands running through Binghe's still wet hair.

Oh, he thinks.

Oh.

He loves Shen Yuan.

“I’m here too!” Ning Yingying complains, and Luo Binghe burrows deeper, squeezing Shen Yuan closer, mind whirling, “A-Luo, he cheated! A-Yuan cheated, he doesn’t deserve hugs!”

“I did not cheat!” Shen Yuan protests, and Luo Binghe reluctantly loosens the hug so that Shen Yuan can step away to defend his honor, arms crossed, “I won! A-Ying is just a sore loser.”

“... what?” Luo Binghe mumbles, then straightens up, looking between them. He swallows, curling his fingers inwards so that he won’t tug Shen Yuan back to him, “sorry, cheating? What- what were…?”

Luo Binghe looks around the clearing.

Now, when he has time to take it in, he can see the signs of scuffling on the ground. Dirt and debris kicked up, broken twigs and leaves. Off to the side, there is a wooden sword laying forlorn on the ground. Not far from it is another.

He looks at his friends again, and sees how they are covered in dirt and grass stains, robes untidy. Ning Yingying’s eyes are bloodshot.

“It’s cheating when A-Yuan throws sand in my eyes!” Ning Yingying says, which would explain the state of them.

“This *humble* Shidi is only following Shijie's teachings,” is the snarky reply. Luo Binghe feels like he missed a step, or took a wrong turn. He can’t ever remember them speaking in such a manner to each other.

“Shijie and Yuan are friends again?” he asks, and that stops their bickering. They both blink at him like confused owls. A strand of hair is falling over Yuan’s face. Luo Binghe wants to smooth it away.

He wants to do a lot of things, he realizes, and his hands feel clammy. Which is unfortunate, because one of those things he wants to do is to hold Yuan’s hand, the way they always do. But he can’t do that if his hands are sticky and gross.

Shen Yuan’s face softens.

“Yes, we’re friends now. Binghe doesn’t have to worry anymore,” the other boy says, taking Binghe’s clammy hand and giving it a squeeze, as if it’s not gross at all, “I’m sorry that we put you through so much, Binghe. It won’t happen again.”

He should yank his hand away, wipe it against his uniform. Instead, Luo Binghe can’t help

but squeeze back as he smiles. Shen Yuan has always run colder than him, but right now his hand is warm and a little dirty. Luo Binghe doesn't mind.

"I'm just glad that no one is upset anymore," he says, shoving down what wants to bubble up to the surface. It *is* good that they could solve it on their own. It would be selfish to feel anything but happy.

"A-Luo is back early," Ning Yingying says, retying the ribbons in her hair. They are white for the day, the ends now smudged brown with dirt. Both of his friends are dirty, in need of a good wash.

"Of course Binghe is back early," Shen Yuan replies, rolling his eyes before sending one of those tilted smiles at Binghe, the kind that he only ever gives Binghe. They have always made him feel all warm inside; and now he knows why. "It's *Binghe.* He always works hard."

Luo Binghe's feels his cheeks heat up.

"Yuan is all dirty," he says, and frees his hand just to pat his best friend down, hoping that his blush is too faint for Shen Yuan to take notice. As it is, Shen Yuan huffs a laugh but lets him fuss, the way he always does. "But you won? The… match? Were you sparring?"

That is the only thing that would make sense. The wooden swords, the isolated clearing- though why they can't train where they are *supposed* to do so, he doesn't know. It would be safer. Shen Yuan always gets hurt. Though… the way he had looked, pinning down Ning Yingying…

"It was his *first* win," Ning Yingying says, and she looks both proud and annoyed, puffing up her cheeks, "and it will be Shidi's last one too!"

"It will *not,"* Shen Yuan protests, and Luo Binghe bites his tongue, deciding against mentioning the sparring sessions of the past.

It's not Shen Yuan's fault; if he hadn't been injured for so long, kept from practice, then he would not be so far behind.

"A first win means we need to celebrate," he says instead, "I'll cook. Is there anything Yuan wants?" Luo Binghe then asks, and watches as Shen Yuan's face lights up.

"Anything Binghe makes is the best," Shen Yuan says, and Binghe wonders if he will have time to make spring rolls, or maybe even a soup, perhaps wonton, Shen Yuan's favorite, "I need to go and tell Shishu that I won't be staying the night, can- is that alright? I don't want to leave Binghe to do everything by himself."

Luo Binghe thinks back to the last time Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying 'cooked'. The crunchy rice, the half-raw, slimy vegetables… the fish that hadn't looked like fish.

"Don't worry," he says with a straight face, "I'll be fine."

Eventually, after Ning Yingying bounces off to get ready, after Shen Yuan goes to tell Mu Qingfang the change of plans–

Luo Binghe stands in the kitchen of the bamboo house. Hands pressed against the counter, face bright red as he stares down at the ingredients before him. Luo Binghe bites his lip, and then hides his face behind his hands, feeling how warm his cheeks are.

He thinks about ink black hair and bright green eyes. He thinks about how Shen Yuan's lips naturally turn down, just a little, whenever he is relaxed, making him look just a little bit grumpy. Luo Binghe thinks about Shen Yuan wrinkling his nose, rolling his eyes, the way his feet are ice cold when they sleep. Luo Binghe thinks about Shen Yuan's smiles.

He loves him.

It takes a while for Luo Binghe to start cooking.

Outside, the sky has grown darker as the sun begins to disappear behind the mountain peaks. Inside, Shen Yuan has his elbows on the table and leans in closer, wondering if he should've written it all down.

"So all those eyes of the vipers," he says, "were different colors? Not just- not just between individuals, but on *one* snake, there could be several different types of eyes?" The books hadn't mentioned that!

Hell, *Airplane* hadn't written that!

Luo Binghe smiles and nods, tugging his hair free from the ponytail he had tied it in for cooking. Now their plates and bowls are all clean and back in the kitchen, and Ning Yingying releases a mighty yawn way too close to Shen Yuan's ear. Which he is just going to ignore, thanks. If only Binghe sat next to him instead- but nooo, his best friend likes to sit on the other side of the table. So he can *'see how much Yuan enjoys the food he made,'* he claims, leaving Shen Yuan to the mercies of Ning Yingying's gross yawns.

And then Binghe has the nerve to frown whenever Ning Yingying leans against him! They can *swap places,* Binghe! If you want to sit next to your wife, just say so!

Every day, Shen Yuan loses sight of how she was ever the cute wife. It seems so distant now. Or maybe that's the one too many times she kicked his ass. Either way, Binghe has no right, making such faces every time Ning Yingying is being a pest, as if Shen Yuan is to blame.

"I found one that had ten different colors," Binghe says, "and it only repeated twice for each

eye."

"That is *so* many eyes for a little snake," Ning Yingying says.

"They *are* called Many Eyed Cloud Vipers," Shen Yuan points out, and then sighs. "I hope I can see them too, one day. In the wild. If Shizun *ever* lets me off the mountain."

There shouldn't be any reasons as to why Shen Qingqiu *wouldn't.* It's not like Shen Yuan has gotten attacked by any demons inside the sect. And yeah, the demon invasion will happen in a few months, but that will *not* be his fault. And also he won't be alone.

If Shen Qingqiu decides to be a bitch and use it as an excuse to ban Shen Yuan from future nighthunts, then he better do it for *everyone* on Qing Jing Peak, damn it.

"Of course Shizun will let A-Yuan out," Ning Yingying says, "he's not unfair. It was to protect A-Yuan from being silly and getting hurt again."

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe exchange a *look.*

"Or he will keep me locked up forever, and A-Ying and Binghe have to tell me all about their adventures," Shen Yuan says, though… honestly, Ning Yingying hasn't gotten to leave much either. He can count on one hand the times she's been away from the mountain.

And even then, Ming Fan only ever assigned her to *errands.* Not monster hunting or even exorcisms, but errands.

But she will marry Binghe, and there were *plenty* of chapters in the original where Luo Binghe had taken a wife along for whatever reason. He wishes that best friends could be counted as Necessary Companions for Fun Adventures, but they live in a sex-crazed novel. The missions would all end in get fucked or get killed, and Shen Yuan has only had *one* mission so far and, well. Off to a bad start.

Not that he would want to fuck Binghe, obviously.

"Then A-Yuan should just marry A-Luo," Ning Yingying says, and Shen Yuan spits tea all across the table. Only luck saves poor Binghe from the spray.

"What!?" Shen Yuan wheezes, wiping at his mouth.

"No? Then this Shijie will marry A-Yuan," Ning Yingying declares, "I'll take good care of you! Provide the best books!"

Luo Binghe, whose face had turned red, immediately looks grumpy instead. Don't worry, protagonist! He is *not* interested in Ning Yingying!!!

"Why must I marry *anyone?"* Shen Yuan sputters, "what does that have to do with anything?"

“Because Shizun can’t tell married people what to do,” Ning Yingying explains, as if that makes any sense at all, “so then A-Yuan can go and explore with us as much as he wants! It’s perfect.”

Shen Yuan is *not* going to look at Binghe, who is too quiet. Ning Yingying may not know about her future husband, but Binghe *clearly* has already gone and gotten a crush. When? No clue! But Shen Yuan is not going to let this discussion go any further, that’s what!

“Why must I marry? Why can’t *you* marry someone?” he asks, “it’s not like A-Ying gets to go out much either!”

“If we get married to each other, that solves it!” she argues back.

“What about Binghe!?”

“Me?” Luo Binghe says, looking adorably confused.

“Yes! You will be left out, so we can’t get married! Obviously!”

“Binghe can be our concubine,” Ning Yingying says.

Like a crazy person.

Concubine. Binghe??? Binghe the concubine??? No! Luo Binghe *has* concubines!!!! AND WIVES. A lot of them!!!! *CONCUBINE???*

“Why must I become a concubine?” Luo Binghe complains, as he should, “why not Shijie? I’ll- that is-”

What??? What????

“Because A-Luo spends too much time away anyway, so he doesn’t *need* to get married,” Ning Yingying says and it must be a talent, speaking as if she is making sense when she is, in fact, making none, “but don’t worry, A-Luo. Married couples *always* like their concubines more! We will buy you so many things, and then you can cook lots and lots of delicious food for us–”

“I NEED THE BATHROOM,” Shen Yuan yells, and flees.

Later, once Ning Yingying has left and Shen Yuan has snuck back inside, once they have changed into night clothes and settled down for Shen Yuan to braid Luo Binghe’s hair, both

sitting on the bed as Shen Yuan drags his fingers through ridiculously soft curls–

Only then does he remember to ask.

“Binghe,” he says, scratching lightly at the other’s scalp, biting back a grin when that makes Binghe lean into it like a cute little puppy begging for more pets, “I have a question.”

“Mn?”

“What’s that pouch?”

The pouch is currently in Luo Binghe’s lap. But Shen Yuan has seen how he keeps touching it throughout the day, tapping his fingers against it, playing with the drawstrings. He kept expecting his friend to open it, but it never happened.

But now, safe from Ning Yingying’s insanity, he can’t hold it in any longer. Though by how Luo Binghe went from half-melted goo to stiff as a stone statue, perhaps he should have. He didn’t realize it was a landmine.

“Sorry,” Shen Yuan says, bunching the hair all together, accidentally catching the pendant’s string with it. He carefully tugs it free. “If Binghe doesn’t want to tell me, it’s alright.”

He *hopes* Binghe will tell him, because Shen Yuan really, really, *really* wants to know what’s up with it. Did Binghe find something cool when hunting? Is it a souvenir? An artifact of untold cosmic power??? Anything is possible! It’s Luo Binghe!

However, Shen Yuan is the best friend of the protagonist. Which means he has to be supportive and totally patient.

“No, I… I never found the time to bring it up,” Binghe says, which is a good sign for Shen Yuan’s sanity, “it’s a gift. Well, they were gifts for Yuan and Shijie, but Shijie has gone to bed now, so.”

Gifts?

Shen Yuan’s grasp loosens; he hurriedly gathers up all the hair once more, and forces himself to look at it as he begins to braid it together, rather than peering over Binghe’s shoulder to stare at the pouch. Which holds gifts. For him. And for Ning Yingying, yes, but for him?

“I thought Binghe wouldn’t pass by any towns?” he asks, instead of demanding to know what he bought, “did you run into a traveling merchant on the way home?”

The back of Binghe’s neck is red. Is he pulling too hard? But if he loosen too much, the braid won’t hold. Shen Yuan frowns, and then realizes that Binghe is mumbling. Just low enough that Shen Yuan can’t make out the words. It’s been a bit like that all day, hasn’t it? Ever since his friend returned, he’s been more quiet. Not completely mute, but- it’s noticeable. Shen Yuan is used to teasing Ning Yingying with him as much as he’s used to the both of them ganging up on him in return. It’s almost as if Binghe is *shy,* but… he’s never been shy.

It can't be because of the gift, can it?

"Sorry, could you repeat that?" he asks.

"... I made it," Binghe mumbles.

"You made it," Shen Yuan echoes. And then the words register, and he only barely manages to tie off the braid, a burst of excitement in his chest, "really? Can I see?"

"It *is* for Yuan," Binghe says, but as Shen Yuan peers around him, he can see how his friend clutches at the pouch, as if Shen Yuan is going to snatch it right out of his hands.

Oh.

Oh right.

Luo Binghe is a perfectionist.

It's a thing that Shen Yuan is aware of; from reading about it, from seeing it in person. Whenever Luo Binghe decides to do something, he will do it as perfectly as one possibly can and shamefully bury the evidence of past failures. Once he became an emperor, it was a sign of strength. But at this age it had mostly just been very sad.

The fact that their shelves contain trinkets of crude artwork is purely because Shen Yuan is stubborn; if he had let Binghe decide, all of it would have been thrown into the Endless Abyss itself. Or burnt into ashes, which in turn would have been buried somewhere in secret to ensure none would ever find the remains.

Shen Yuan rests his chin against Binghe's shoulder.

"Binghe knows I'll love it," he says and wraps his arms around the other boy in a hug, "anything Binghe makes is always the best."

For whatever reason, the protagonist only seems more tense. When Shen Yuan tilts his head, turning just enough so that he can see Luo Binghe's profile, he's surprised to find the boy blushing, dark eyes clearly avoiding looking at him.

"Binghe?" he asks, and gives the end of the braid a light tug, "you don't have to show me if you don't want to? Or…" Shen Yuan glances towards the pouch again, "or is it that you want to give a gift to A-Ying first?" he asks.

The question tastes sour; obviously he doesn't want to *wait* for a gift from Binghe, but he knows that the future wife comes first. Especially with how his best friend has been acting all day. It's totally fine.

"No! No," Binghe says, startling him, "I want to give it to Yuan first. It's just- do you- does Yuan…?" he trails off.

????

Does he what??? Speak, protagonist!

“Do I…?”

“Does Yuan like Shijie?” Luo Binghe bursts out.

“What,” he says blankly, arms loosening enough that Binghe can twist around, turning to face him. His friend’s face is bright red, but his mouth is set in a stubborn line and his eyes glitter with determination despite his burning cheeks and hunched shoulders. Shen Yuan stares, perplexed, heart beating in his chest.

And then he remembers how Binghe had returned; right as Shen Yuan finally won against Ning Yingying by pinning her down, and *oh no.*

“No!” he denies, his own face red now, “absolutely not!”

Binghe blinks.

“Yuan doesn’t?” he asks, as if that is a surprise.

“I would *never,”* Shen Yuan swears, “not ever!” That would kill him! Literally!!! No one could steal a wife and survive, and besides, it’s *Ning Yingying.* The idea of even kissing her is just impossible, making his brain bluescreen. Hell, he swears even the System is glitching in the corner of his eye, giving him *Satisfaction Points* for whatever reason.

Well, maybe he can guess why he is being given those. But he doesn’t want to know about it, alright??? He had no fucking idea Binghe was seeing him as a rival! He’s meant to be the wingman, damn it!!!

“Oh,” Luo Binghe breathes, and gives him a dazzling smile, “oh, alright. I heard the elders speak about it, and… and here,” he hurries, opening the pouch, but before Shen Yuan can grab at the distraction with greedy hands, Binghe hides it from view. “Close your eyes.”

Shen Yuan closes his eyes; it’s easy to do so, when Binghe’s smile is so blinding. He sits there for a moment, hand out, eyes closed, heart still beating too fast for no good reason, before he feels something being pressed into his palm.

“Yuan can look now,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan looks.

In his hand there is a snake.

It’s made of wood, and crude, shaped like a loose S-shape, the head a bit too big, the tail ending in a too sharp point. As Shen Yuan holds it closer to look at it, he can see where the blade must have cut in at the wrong angles, trying to make a scale pattern across the pale surface, how some corners are still not fully smoothed out, and–

“Oh,” he breathes, all worries about Binghe and Ning Yingying melting away as Shen Yuan traces the dots of colors scattered all over the snake, “it’s a Many Eyed Cloud Viper.”

“It was meant to be put on as a necklace,” Binghe says, “but I’m not skilled enough for such small crafts, so it’s just a decoration instead. But- does Yuan like it? Heng-shixiong let me borrow some of his paint for the eyes, but they’re smudged. I would understand if Yuan would like something better.”

It’s far from perfect, that’s for sure. But Shen Yuan tilts it and looks at the face. The eyes, unlike the body, are perfectly symmetrical. There is a tiny triangle to mark the mouth, giving the snake an endearing expression.

It’s only when his cheeks begin to hurt that Shen Yuan realizes he’s smiling too wide. He holds the snake close to his chest and aims the smile at Binghe instead.

“I love it,” he says, and uses his free hand to pull Binghe into a one-armed hug, “thank you, Binghe.”

He can feel his friend smile against his neck.

“Anything for Yuan,” Binghe replies, voice as warm as the glow in Shen Yuan’s chest.

The snake is put by the bedside table, the lantern light making the rough pattern and the smudged eyes look alive. It’s perfect, sitting there, one of the first things that Shen Yuan will wake up to.

Whatever Ning Yingying gets, it *can’t* be better than this.

Shen Yuan falls asleep smiling, cold feet tucked under Binghe’s.

Luo Binghe will have countless wives, but he will only ever have one best friend. That’s special too, he decides, and cuddles closer.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *snores*
LBH: omgomgomgomg I have a chance <3

Somewhere, deep inside the caves, Shen Qingqiu shudders.
Surprise! Binghe only just now realized he's in love :D or maybe it's not a surprise.

These past two weeks have been crazy, oh man. Glad I managed to finish the chapter!
But it was a close one <_<

I also want to thank everyone so much for the lovely comments. I'm sorry I don't always respond, but please know I love and appreciate every single one of them <3

Oh!!! And we got fanart!
mitchievousness drew this amazing Ning Yingying. Please go give them some love <3

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"A-Yuan," Ning Yingying says, "where's my hat?"

Shen Yuan looks up from his book; he has that funny face again, the one he always gets whenever he has been reading too much. Like someone slapped him a minute ago, and he is only now feeling it. Or like he forgot that the sun existed. He blinks like he is dazed, taking a moment to understand what she said.

"Huh?" he finally replies, and Ning Yingying giggles.

"My hat," she says, leaning around Luo Binghe to smile at Shen Yuan, "where did A-Yuan put it?"

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

"I thought… didn't I return it to Shijie?"

"Nope! And I'm cold now, I want it!"

It's already autumn, after all. The air grows colder each day, summer gone as quickly as it arrived. Ning Yingying misses it, of course. She likes dipping her feet in the ponds and she loves the summer festivals that the village by the mountain base hold each year. But she likes autumn too- even if her ears are red from the chill. It's cozy, sitting by the pavilion with her friends, clad in thick robes to combat the cold.

As Shen Yuan thinks on where her hat could be, Ning Yingying leans closer to Luo Binghe instead. They're both carving. The stone path is covered in bits of wood shavings, but Ming Fan hasn't seen it yet so it's fine! They will clean it up before he sees it. Or maybe they can leave it- but then Heng-shixiong might get the blame… well, it will be fine. Luo Binghe will probably insist on cleaning it up, anyway, even though it's just wood shavings. He's weird like that.

A-Luo has gotten better, she then thinks, watching as he squints down at the snake he's trying to perfect.

Ning Yingying is still better, though.

She looks down at the hairpin she's carving for Shizun, and all the little details she managed. There isn't *really* a theme to it. Ning Yingying just wants it covered in pretty things, to match how pretty Shen Qingqiu is. It's only a little bit longer before he will finally leave the caves, and their Shizun deserves a gift for his return.

And when he does return, Shen Yuan will no longer be leaving so often. Luo Binghe will also get to stay home more, and surely Shizun will let Ning Yingying join more missions as well!

Oh, she can't wait.

"A-Luo," Ning Yingying says when Shen Yuan keeps thinking too long, drumming his fingers against the book in his lap, "do *you* know where my hat is?"

"Yes," Luo Binghe says, turning the snake over, probably thinking it looks too flat or something. He's so silly, sometimes. Snakes can be flat! She once saw one squeeze through the tiniest of holes, it was so weird. As weird as watching one eat.

"You do?" Shen Yuan asks, "Wait, how does Binghe know where it is, but I don't?"

"Yuan hasn't needed it for years," Luo Binghe points out.

"Well, yes, but- wait. Wait, years! That's right, A-Ying, why do you want it *now?"* her Shidi demands, closing his book but leaving one finger between the pages. "Doesn't Shijie have a new hat?"

"Of course I do! Shizun gave this one a new hat when A-Yuan borrowed mine," Ning Yingying says, "I'm just *curious*. It was there and then it was gone! Did A-Yuan hide it like a squirrel? Forget all about it?"

Shen Yuan huffs.

He does look a lot like Shizun when he does that; huffing. It reminds her of when she was little, too little to be counted as a disciple of Cang Qiong Mountain but still living on it. Shizun had always huffed at her when she asked him to braid her hair a second or even a third time the very same day. But he *always* did it, anyway. It's not an angry huff.

"You're the squirrel," Shen Yuan replies.

"A-Yuan is so bad at insults," she says, "isn't he, A-Luo?"

"Hey!"

"A little," Luo Binghe says, grinning when Shen Yuan shoves at him, which in turn makes Luo Binghe bump into Ning Yingying. She giggles, and shoves him back, which makes Shen Yuan squawk in protest as Luo Binghe bumps into him instead.

"Don't make me fall," he complains, hooking his foot around Luo Binghe's ankle, "the book might be damaged!"

"Yuan has already read it once," Luo Binghe points out, "why are you reading it again?"

Ning Yingying watches as Shen Yuan's face slowly turns red.

“It’s not a boring book!?” she gasps, jumping up from the bench, the wood shavings that had fallen into her lap now scattering everywhere, “is it a fun one? Like the girls at Xian Shu told me about!? Can I read it?”

The two boys blink up at her.

“What the fuck is Shijie talking about?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

“Oh,” A-Luo says, his cheeks pink, “no, Shijie, it’s not one of *those.”*

“Binghe? What does that mean, what books are-”

“Romance!” Ning Yingying says, “epic romance! It’s so hard to find any, I’m sure that Ming-shixiong is hiding them all from me because he thinks I’m a *baby,* even though I’m not, and–” she falters. “A-Yuan is reading a boring one?” she asks Luo Binghe, just to make sure.

“It’s about swords,” he tells her, “Wu-shishu let him borrow it.”

“Ugh!” Ning Yingying huffs and sits down, right there, on the stone path. Why is she surprised? If A-Yuan isn’t clumsy and getting into trouble, or away from the peak *again,* then he’s *boring.* He’s not even good with swords! Why is he reading about them!? “Shidi, whyyyy. I want romance,” she complains.

“Wha- I- this one- what!? What’s the problem!” Shen Yuan snaps, bright red and clutching the book to his chest as if Ning Yingying is going to steal it. If it was a fun one, she would have, sure, but it’s *not* a fun one. “If- if A-Ying wants romance, she should go and find it! That’s not my problem! This Shidi can read whatever he wants! Right, Binghe?”

“Of course,” Luo Binghe agrees, as he always does.

Ning Yingying sticks her tongue out at both of them.

“It can’t be very good at teaching about swords if A-Yuan has to read it *twice,”* she scoffs.

“Maybe Shijie should read it too,” Shen Yuan says, hugging the book tighter, the cover a dull blue kind of shade, “if she wants to get better at fighting.”

“Reading doesn’t help with that!”

“It can!”

“No it can’t–!”

“It is Qing Jing Peak,” Luo Binghe points out, “reading *does* help. Knowledge is our greatest asset, is it not?”

Ning Yingying groans and flops over, and pretends her elbows didn’t slam too hard into the stone path. It’s fine! She’s not a baby, it didn’t even hurt that much. Her eyes are not tearing

up at all.

“That sounded painful,” A-Luo says, “is Shijie alright?”

“Of course,” she says, “this Shijie is great! Isn’t A-Luo also great? You’ve stayed home for a whole month now!” It’s the longest that Luo Binghe has gotten to stay at the sect since Shizun first went into the caves, and much more important than to see if Ning Yingying has new bruises.

When she sits back up, she catches Luo Binghe’s smile. It’s small but warm, and Ning Yingying wishes she was that pretty. A-Luo has thicker eyelashes than her, glossier hair than her, even a prettier smile than hers and even though he’s a year younger, he already looks like a cultivator in the same way that their Shizun does.

He really would make a good concubine, she thinks wistfully. But A-Yuan gets all *weird* if she brings up marriage, so she doesn’t say it out loud. For once.

“It’s nice,” Luo Binghe agrees, rubbing his thumb against the wooden snake’s head, “I asked Heng-shixiong about it, and he says we mostly get missions during summer and winter, so that might be why.”

“Good,” Shen Yuan says, “I like having Binghe at home. It’s not as boring anymore, and A-Ying can fight you instead of me. But,” he hurries to add before Ning Yingying can make fun of him for it, “this book will help! I’m on the chapter about sword glares, it really is very informative. Fu Yue and I *will* beat you, Shijie.”

“Nu-huh,” she replies, and pats at Mo Liqin’s sword hilt, wrapped in orange to match her ribbons of the day, “never!” Under her hand, Mo Liqin feels like bubbling laughter against her fingertips. Her sword is the *best,* she knows this for a fact.

Luo Binghe’s smile falls.

“What? Yuan, no, that’s too dangerous,” he protests, “we’re always told to not practice sword glares without supervision for a reason. You could get hurt! Shijie as well.”

“A-Luo has been talking too much with Dashixiong,” Ning Yingying says, and the offended glare it gets her makes her laugh so hard she nearly falls over.

“I’m not like Ming Fan,” he mutters.

“Stop being boring then,” Ning Yingying tells him, “A-Luo should just show us how he does it!”

Luo Binghe’s mouth twitches in a very funny way; he looks like he wants to smile at her, but not like a *real* smile. More like when Shizun smiles at Yue-shibo, the one that’s nothing at all like the smiles he gives *her,* but also not like the ones he gives people he is mad at. Except Luo Binghe doesn’t even manage one of those- instead his lips twitch up, then down, then get kind of stuck in a straight line that makes her want to poke at them.

“A-Yuan, tell him to help us,” she says, turning towards Shen Yuan once more, “we don’t have to do it against each other! We can cut other things! Like bamboo. There’s so much of it! No one will mind, right?”

Besides, doesn’t Shang-shishu always complain about having to buy more bamboo for broken things? Truly, Ning Yingying knew this was a great idea.

“Maybe Binghe is right,” Shen Yuan says instead of agreeing with her, and Ning Yingying flicks a scrap of wood at him for being a coward.

He wrinkles his nose at her in return before he continues, “maybe we can just practice our flying instead,” Shen Yuan says, and bumps his shoulder against Luo Binghe’s. “We can even ask Ming-shixiong first, to be safe, if Binghe is so worried.”

Luo Binghe smiles at Shen Yuan.

“We don’t need to do that,” he says, “flying isn’t as dangerous as cutting things with qi.”

Ning Yingying watches as the two smile at each other, and sighs.

She wishes she had a best friend as well; she *also* wants to smile goofily at someone who will smile back, even when they’re being boring.

Sadly, both of her Shidis seem incapable of having more than one best friend. Whatever. At least she *is* a friend of theirs, rather than not at all.

“Fine,” she says and jumps up onto her feet, “let’s go and fly!”

“After we clean up,” Luo Binghe says, and Ning Yingying groans.

She still helps sweep up the wood shavings.

There is just so much sweeping all the time.

Leaves litter everywhere, and that won’t do on *Qing Jing Peak.* It did not matter that it was known not only for the four arts, but also because of how it was just *covered* in bamboo. And as such, they were under siege, because of course the leaves that fell (and sometimes whole bamboo! The fuck!) did not do the polite thing and *stay* where it was supposed to.

Shen Yuan sweeps the stairs leading up to the bamboo house and seethes as he watches more

fall before him, like a fucking plague.

It's getting colder each day now. He's wrapped his hands up in his sleeves to hold the broom, protecting them further from the chilly winds that sweep through the mountain. It looks ridiculous and feels stupid, but at least it's better than being cold as he performs this never ending task.

Well, colder.

Maybe he *should* ask Binghe to find that stupid fucking hat. It looked ridiculous, yes, but at least it was warm. His hair covered his ears- despite Ming Fan's despair and attempts to order him to tie it up- but honestly, human hair was *not* warm enough for the chill of mountain peaks. Especially not Shen Yuan's hair.

Binghe's hair would probably do a better job.

He eyes the other boy's fluffy curls; Binghe is sweeping the path a little further down, hair in partial braids and then tied up into a tail. Despite that, it *still* looks as fluffy as a lamb's wool. Shen Yuan's fingers twitch as he imagines burying his fingers in it.

It would be. So warm.

But before Shen Yuan can do something weird like throw the broom aside to pounce the protagonist for some hand-warming, Ming Fan's voice cuts through the companionable silence.

"Shidi!" he calls, and Shen Yuan has to bite back a laugh as Luo Binghe heaves the kind of sigh very big, very tired dogs are known for. It is like all of the world's troubles are now on Binghe's shoulders.

"Shixiong," Luo Binghe greets with all the enthusiasm of a dead rock.

Ming Fan scowls; his cheeks are red, from cold or annoyance or- something. Ming Fan's cheeks are always red for one reason or another during the autumn, it seems. Especially now when Ning Yingying is leaning into her new bruiser persona.

To be fair, Shen Yuan *also* doesn't know how to handle seeing the first wife and childhood friend just… whaling on all the practice dummies. So he mostly pretends he doesn't see it, until the crazy girl decides it's time for them to spar instead. That is when he has to pay attention, to decrease the risk of a bloodied nose.

"Shidi should be capable of showing a sliver of manners by now," Ming Fan scolds, "he has spent so long here, how is it that the basics of civility has yet to go through Shidi's thick skull? Shameful!"

Luo Binghe makes direct eye contact as he performs what could, technically, be called a bow but is very clearly skirting the lines of it. It is stiff and barely low enough at all, and the fact that he keeps eye contact makes it go from bad to insulting. Shen Yuan shouldn't laugh. He

really shouldn't laugh. That would not be helpful. He bites his lip.

Ming Fan's face grows redder.

"Dashixiong," Shen Yuan says and pretends his voice isn't strained from not laughing, instead stepping up and offering a bow of his own. Not that he feels *that* much respect, but it's too cold to be standing outside and listening to another tirade that he knows Binghe won't listen to. It's a little bit funny how Binghe has less respect for Ming Fan *now* than when he was bullied in the original, sure, but not funny enough that Shen Yuan wants to lose feeling in all of his fingers, "how may this one be of help?"

His attempt at being polite earns him a look of deep suspicion.

"Did you two do something?" Ming Fan asks, crossing his arms.

"We have only done our chores," Shen Yuan tells him, holding up the broom as evidence as he goes to stand next to Binghe, "which is sweeping. Why is Shixiong so suspicious?"

Ming Fan glares.

He clearly wants to point out that *normally,* Shen Yuan is as disrespectful as Binghe is. But they really *have* just been sweeping. There is no lie to spot.

Ming Fan stares him down for a long time.

Slowly, Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe tap their brooms together, the wooden handles making *clunk, clunk* sounds.

"Stop that," Ming Fan demands, then huffs and smooths out his robes, "this Shixiong is here to give you both a *new* task. Here," and he holds out a scroll. It's a wooden one, tied together with red string. "Go to Lie Jiu Peak, give this one to whoever is the current head disciple."

"Current?" Shen Yuan repeats, taking the scroll.

"They lost their previous one," Ming Fan sniffs, "this one has been too busy to meet the new one. If there is one, that is."

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe exchange a glance.

"Lost?" Shen Yuan asks, and tries to remember. Did it happen during their time here? Lie Jiu Peak… that is the one with the talismans. And artifacts- all the things that are best kept stored away from curious hands. There were multiple storylines with Luo Binghe stumbling upon one of them in his travels, usually something stolen from the sect that he no doubt would then use in his whole revenge arc.

There, uh. There were a lot of real shady things.

"Did they die?" Binghe asks, apparently as curious as Shen Yuan, "or did something else

happen?"

"Die? No, they got married and left, as if there is anywhere better to be than Cang Qiong Mountain! Unbelievable, isn't it?"

Okay, so maybe sometimes one could agree with Ming Fan.

"That is weird," Shen Yuan agrees, "choosing marriage over cultivation? Ah, not that there's anything wrong with marriage!" he hurries to add, "just- this one would certainly *not* leave the sect just to get married."

"... does one have to leave to get married?" Luo Binghe asks, looking very pale. Shen Yuan winces.

"Obviously not," Ming Fan scoffs, "there are plenty who are married within the sect! The one who left just met a girl and- whatever. Go and deliver it! And if there's no head disciple still, give it to whoever makes talismans."

It's the talisman peak. Don't they all make talismans?

But Shen Yuan decides against saying *that.* Because they are free! The endless sweeping has, at last, ended! Shen Yuan resists the urge to throw the broom away.

"We shall do so immediately," he promises, "what does it say?"

"It is simply a request for more talisman supplies," Ming Fan says, and then snaps his fingers before he points at Luo Binghe, "and you! New mission in four days."

Shen Yuan's smile falls.

Well, shit.

Lie Jiu Peak has caves.

Not that one can see them; but Shen Yuan remembers bits and pieces of gossip, of how each building on the peak is hiding another entrance to the caves below. It is where artifacts are stored and hidden away, like underground warehouses of immense power. It's very secretive, the only peak that outsiders are not allowed to even visit.

The few visible buildings are intended for talismans and ink making instead, for paper pressing and studying, and yet definitely hiding an entrance or two to the caves below

ground. And the buildings *are* few in comparison to all the other peaks- though he wonders if even the ones meant as living quarters might be hiding secret doors somewhere.

It should be exciting.

And yet, Ming Fan's words make it difficult to muster up any curiosity. Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe arrive to no head disciple, having to ask around for the right master to get the two boxes of whatever talisman that Ming Fan has decided they need more of. They are told to wait outside, the woman disappearing into a building that smells of ink and paper and nothing else.

They spend their time waiting by watching ink being made.

Shen Yuan sees how hands are stained black as they knead and pound the material like it is pitch black toffee. It looks so stretchy and edible, and he wonders how long it takes to make ink in this world. This stage alone seems to take forever. What about the previous one? Or the ones that come after? How do they make this stretchy material into something that can be turned into bricks of writing material?

What is the difference between low quality and high quality?

"Four days means there's not much to prepare for, right?" he blurts out instead, glancing down at Binghe. When *will* the protagonist get his growth spurt? "So that must mean Binghe won't be gone for long, doesn't it? So that's good."

He's grasping at straws and well aware of it. It's just that Binghe is *sad.* The protagonist looks so downtrodden, the casual comradery of sweeping the stairs together gone, replaced by the look of a kicked puppy.

Obviously they are never happy when Binghe is sent off for another night hunt. But this had been the longest break so far, so long that Shen Yuan had kind of hoped that Ming Fan decided there just was no point anymore. Shen Qingqiu will, after all, soon return and be more concerned with other things than Binghe's missions.

Is what Shen Yuan would like to believe, anyway.

Though Shen Qingqiu is too much of a bitch to make things easy on them, more so with how he *still* hasn't responded to any letters that Shen Yuan manages to convince Yue Qingyuan or Mu Qingfang to deliver. He will likely immediately see that Binghe hasn't been thrown off the mountain in the name of missions and throw a fit instead.

Unless the demon invasion distracts him.

Shen Yuan falters.

When exactly was it? It happened as Shen Qingqiu left the caves, yes, but- was it winter? Spring? It can't have been now. It feels too early…

“Maybe,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan jumps guiltily, realizing he zoned out. But Luo Binghe only gives him a knowing smile, because he’s a very forgiving friend like that, “but right now, does Yuan want to explore while we wait?” he asks.

“No,” Shen Yuan says, and flushes at the doubtful look he gets for it, “maybe another time, but not today,” he adds, “I don’t want us to get in trouble and do nothing but punishments until Binghe must leave.”

“Trouble?” one of the men working says, glancing towards them.

His hands are stained black, his sleeves tied up and out of the way. Lie Jiu Peak is very daring with their choice of uniform, Shen Yuan thinks. Long sleeves, dark blue inner clothes and dusty blue outer robe? With an orange sash around the waist and little bells jingling from it??? Alright, okay, there’s pouches there as well, no doubt filled to the brim with crazy talismans. But pale blue outer robes? When making ink!?

It’s impressive that only the man’s *hands* have been stained by the ink. If it was Shen Yuan, those robes would *not* be that nice blue shade. Though, when he peeks closer, that is not true. The sleeves *are* stained by the ink, it’s just hard to see when they are tied back. But why tie them back if they are already dirty? They look dry, too, from where he is standing.

“Ah,” the man then says as he looks at Shen Yuan, “trouble indeed, with such a face.”

Shen Yuan flushes red; beside him, Binghe stiffens.

“Has this one’s face caused offense?” Shen Yuan asks, grabbing Binghe’s hand and hiding it as he shuffles closer, giving it a warning squeeze.

The man hums, watching them for a moment.

He is a handsome one, big surprise there. Freckles is scattered across his face, mimicking the splatter of ink against his skin. Black hair that shines blue in the sunlight hangs down in what Shen Yuan privately calls the Dead Mom Anime hairstyle, or side plait if one wants to be less nerdy about it. The man’s dark gray eyes are hooded, giving him a lazy air, as if he would rather be sunbathing somewhere.

Considering that he hasn’t stopped kneading the slabs of ink, the lazy vibe is clearly a lie. The tied up sleeves means they can see the man’s forearms, and the way veins bulge and muscles move with each movement.

“Your name must be Shen Yuan,” the man says, and Shen Yuan blinks back to reality, dragging his eyes away from those arms to the man’s face instead.

“How…?”

“The face of trouble,” the man murmurs, and then goes back to kneading at the ink.

Fair enough. Months away from Shen Qingqiu, and Shen Yuan is still compared to him. He

wonders how the man before them knows their Shizun. So far, he seems like the kind of guy that walks too slowly in front of you. The kind of guy that Shen Qingqiu would probably stab out of spite for being too slow.

When the man says nothing more, Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe exchange a confused glance. Eventually, all they can do is lean back and wait for the talismans.

They come in two heavy boxes.

If Shen Yuan had known they wouldn't be able to fly back… that they had to *walk* all the way back to Qing Jing Peak while carrying two boxes filled with magic paper? He would have said no.

Ming Fan would have ignored it, of course, but that's not the point.

"Does Yuan need help?" Binghe asks as Shen Yuan wobbles slightly under the weight.

"I've carried books heavier than this," Shen Yuan lies, and then gives Binghe's foot a nudge with his own. "Let's go, before we miss dinner."

With that, they leave.

Maybe they can explore Lie Jiu Peak another day.

Without some weird dude calling Shen Yuan *trouble.*

Binghe is decidedly stiff when he gets into the bath.

Shen Yuan can't say he is surprised; for whatever reason, the protagonist insisted he could carry Shen Yuan's box too. Normally, he would have told his friend to not be silly. But, well. The box had been heavy and Binghe kept saying he could *totally* carry it, so who was Shen Yuan to doubt him?

And now Binghe is paying for it.

The bath may not be a hot spring, but at least it's not cold. Shen Yuan sits in it, keeping an eye on his friend as he awkwardly gets in, wincing every time he has to raise his arms. Did he pull something? He must have. Those boxes were heavy as *fuck.* They may be growing into cultivator strength, but that had been pushing it. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if Binghe then hadn't insisted on helping carrying bags of rice into the storage room, or challenged Ning Yingying to a spar after she brought up marriage again. He had won, but at

what cost?

Honestly, Binghe can be so stubborn sometimes.

“Stop that,” Shen Yuan scolds when Binghe once again tries to wash his thick curls, only to wince before he can fully raise his arms. Shen Yuan slides over, the water rippling, gently lapping against them as he positions himself behind Binghe.

“What?” Luo Binghe says, but Shen Yuan pokes him in the side before he can turn around to look.

“Binghe should rest his arms,” he says, gently pushing all of those curls over the other boy’s shoulder, giving him a full view of Binghe’s back, “I think you pulled something in your shoulders. Let me check?”

He presses his hands to Luo Binghe’s back. The muscles there jump, and *wow,* it must be painful. Poor Binghe is so very tensed up, every muscle straining. There’s also a concerning redness going from his nape and down to his shoulders.

Did he hurt his neck as well? Is the redness from muscle inflammation? That’s serious! That’s bad!

“Binghe?” he prods, sliding his hands into the proper position. One between Binghe’s shoulder blades, one near his lower back. It means he has one hand under water and one above, but that shouldn’t be a problem. What is a problem is Luo Binghe not responding.

“W-What is- what is Yuan doing?” his friend stutters out before Shen Yuan can ask again.

“Healing? Or, I hope I’ll be able to do it,” he says, looking at the baby hair that curls up by Binghe’s nape. Shen Yuan has the weirdest urge to blow air at it, but he doesn’t want to tease when his friend is in pain, “but first I must examine Binghe. It’s alright! Mu-shishu showed me how to examine using qi, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Okay,” Binghe says, voice strained.

Hopefully Shen Yuan will help fix that.

He closes his eyes and focuses. Examinations have become easier to do, not only with Mu Qingfang’s help but also whenever Shang Qinghua needs him. So it’s not difficult at all to let his consciousness flow through Luo Binghe’s meridians. To track down the first signs of inflammation and soothe it with a pulse of qi, smoothing it out like wrinkled fabric.

It’s not as much as he feared; the neck seems fine, though he makes sure to double check just in case. When Shen Yuan opens his eyes, it still looks red. Still, he’s *certain* that he didn’t miss anything, so it must be something else.

He eyes his friend.

And then Shen Yuan grins and blows air against the nape.

Luo Binghe *squeaks,* jerking away, and Shen Yuan laughs and splashes water at him.

“All better! But take it easy, don’t lift anything heavy until tomorrow,” he says, only to blink as Binghe keeps moving away, keeps- what the–?

He watches as his friend scrambles out of the nice, comfortable bath and into the *cold one.*

“Binghe?” he asks, bracing his hands against the edge of the bath to peer over, furrowing his brow, “you will get a cold!” It’s autumn! The water in *that* bath is cold as ice on the hottest summer day thanks to the stones at the bottom, with simple arrays carved into them to keep it cold.

“No, no, I’m fine,” Binghe says, teeth chattering, face bright red and eyes very much not looking towards him, “don’t mind this one! It’s- it’s to help! With the shoulders, I heard once that putting something cold against strained muscles helps. Yuan made it much better, I would not want to put your efforts to waste.”

Shen Yuan stares.

It might be true that cold can help, but that seems overkill. Though if he is going to drag Binghe out of there, that means he has to touch the ice bath of death. Which he doesn’t want to.

Slowly, Shen Yuan sinks back down into the water.

“... if Binghe gets sick, I’ll never let you live it down,” he warns.

His friend smiles at him, face still red.

“Would Yuan take care of me if I did?”

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes.

“Obviously,” he says, “don’t be silly, you’re too smart for that.”

Luo Binghe’s smile widens.
He looks a little funny like that; teeth chattering loud enough to be heard, and still smiling.

Crazy, Shen Yuan thinks fondly, and promises himself to check for a fever in the morning. Half-demon he might be, but until the seal breaks, Binghe will remain perfectly human, immune system and all.

The reminder of the seal has him ducking his head, turning away from Binghe before his friend can see his frown.

He really should check up on Airplane, see if he has made progress on how to avoid *that.*

Maybe it’s a good thing that Binghe is leaving in four days.

Shen Yuan will have to go there as soon as he can.

Chapter End Notes

NYY: no but guys, I really do think I should marry A-Yuan! I think A-Luo would be SO happy as our concubine and A-Yuan would be such a cute wife-
SY: hold up, why am I the wife???
LBH: For No Reason What So Ever, we should spar RIGHT now.
SY: aw, look, he's showing off to Ning Yingying! That's cute. One day, Binghe, she will see that you would be the best husband ^^

Traditional ink making is insane and very hypnotizing to watch, btw.
This chapter was difficult to write! Not because it was actually hard to write, I knew what I wanted. But! We are quickly approaching Shen Qingqiu's return, and I'm SO excited for it!!! But the more excited I get, the more my brain only wants to write THAT. For obvious reasons, this makes it a bit difficult to write the scenes leading up to it. Oops. They're kind of important so I can't skip them <_<

The other day I was shown a tiktok for this fic. Crazy. *waves* hi Tyler! It made me very happy!

Also the next chapter will 100% be delayed. I won't have access to a computer at the time. So this is the warning! It might take three or four weeks instead of two, though I'm very much hoping it will be three. It all depends though.

As always, thank you guys so much for your lovely comments! I am only sorry that I am so bad at replying these days, but please know they always brighten up my day. Thank you <3

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the last day before Binghe has to leave, it is dusting day.

Dusting day does not mean much, really. It only means they must move things around within the bamboo house, picking them up and putting them back down as they dust the shelves. It's all fancy things, even the ones that don't look like it, because of course they are. It *is* a Peak Lord's house. Shen Yuan is pretty sure even *one* of the books costs more than Lady Jia bought him for- not that he knows how much he cost. It hadn't been a priority to know. But it is a simple task, dusting, though it always makes Shen Yuan feel–

Uneasy.

Not that he is going to think about why.

At least Binghe always volunteers to handle the breakable things. The porcelain, the little statues that pop up here and there. The things that Shen Yuan just *knows* he will drop and shatter to a million pieces.

Granted, Binghe did break that one cup months ago. But that was, ah. Well. Shen Yuan knows it won't happen again. And he glued it back together! So it's fine. You can *barely* see the cracks. Worst case, maybe he can swap it with Yue Qingyuan's? He had a similar one. Though that feels rude. Yue Qingyuan is *nice,* unlike certain people whom Shen Yuan shall not name.

He looks at the fan in his hands.

It is white and lined with dark wood. A crisscross pattern is carved into the frame. The fan itself is painted with bamboo leaves scattered across the paper, as if caught by the wind. It is one of the more simple ones.

Shen Qingqiu really does have a lot of fans.

Does he buy them all for himself? Or does someone else gift him? Is it perhaps a mix of both? It would explain all the different designs- Shen Qingqiu isn't really a collector. A collector would put the fans on display, not just pile them haphazardly on a table. If it was *his* fans, he would have them in the most organized display of all time, like seriously–

"Where is Yuan going to stay this time?"

He nearly drops the fan, and proceeds to nearly drop it again three more times before he has it clutched safely in his hands. By the time Shen Yuan looks up, Luo Binghe is looking at him with twitching lips, dark eyes sparkling and clearly trying his very best to not laugh.

“Sorry, what?” Shen Yuan asks, and snaps the fan open to hide his stupid, burning face behind, “I didn’t hear. What was that?”

“I was wondering where Yuan would stay this time,” Binghe says, voice trembling with withheld laughter, “so that if I arrive early, I know where to look for you.”

“Mu-shishu has asked me to stay,” he says, and is half-tempted to whack Binghe with the fan to make him stop laughing. But it’s not *his* fan, is it? Shen Qingqiu would murder him if he broke it. Reluctantly, he snaps it closed and puts it down next to the rest of them. “He wants to see how much I’ve been able to learn since we last spoke.”

Binghe’s lips softens into a smile. It’s a proud one, and how could Shen Yuan not feel warm seeing the protagonist be *proud* of him?

“Yuan is a prodigy,” his friend declares, and Shen Yuan huffs and gives him a light shove.

“Binghe is the prodigy,” he returns, “one that must get up early tomorrow, is that not right?” Shen Yuan pinches Binghe’s cheek, “this one heard that you grow while you sleep. Is that perhaps why Binghe is still so small? Because he doesn’t sleep enough?” he teases, and laughs as his friend swats the hand away, blushing a bright pink.

“This one is only being polite, letting his elders feel superior-”

“Oh, please, I’m like two months older at *most–”*

They bicker all the way through getting ready for sleep and up until it’s time for bed, and Shen Yuan does his very best to not think about how this will be the last time for a few weeks that he will sleep in it. Though he can’t help but note that it is starting to get a little bit cramped; it takes an awful lot of shuffling and rearranging for them both to fit on the bed *and* under the same blanket, autumn keeping the room too cold to dare risk any toes poking out. But they manage.

He yawns, and throws an arm over his best friend. It doesn’t take long before they are both asleep.

When he wakes, it is a slow kind of thing. It is warm. His body feels heavy, but in a pleasant way. For a moment, Shen Yuan only presses closer to the warmth all around him, vaguely wondering why he is even awake. The warmth shifts, and something pokes him. Shen Yuan burrows his face against soft curls and grumbles, and the poking follows.

He reluctantly forces his eyes open.

It doesn't help much; there's just thick, soft curls covering his vision. Still too close to being asleep, he spits out a lock of hair that's not his and doesn't have enough brainpower to feel embarrassed about it.

"What's that?" he asks, words slurring.

"Mngh," Binghe helpfully replies.

Is it a sword? Did either of them bring their sword to bed? Or a book? Did he read before falling asleep, and now it's squeezed between them? Wouldn't be the first time. Shen Yuan should sit up, lift the blanket to check, make it easy to find.

But he *really* doesn't want to be awake. And Binghe is such a nice furnace, and sitting up will let all that lovely, perfect warmth escape.

Shen Yuan wiggles an arm in between them and fumbles around, trying to find whatever it is that's poking at him. It's not *painful,* just annoying. The room is still dark, which means it's definitely illegal to be awake already. There's not even a *glimpse* of light in the room.

Oh! Found it.

It's not a book, at least. So that means he can blame–

Binghe makes a *sound.*

It's a sound Shen Yuan never heard before from his best friend, and it makes him feel weirdly hot. It *also* makes him realize that what he is trying to move away is- it's not– as Binghe's hips jerks into it–

It's *not* a sword.

He realizes this about the same time Binghe snaps awake and *throws himself* off the bed, landing with a loud enough thump that means it had to hurt. Shen Yuan stares into the blue darkness, hand burning, fingers twitching, his *face* burning as well, and holy shit.

Silence settles like a blanket woven of mortification and shock. Slowly, Shen Yuan sits up and stares towards the dark silhouette of his friend. With a clumsy hand wave, he manages to light the lantern. The light flickers in the room, revealing Luo Binghe on the floor, bright red and wild eyed, hair a mess from sleep. The shadows are deep enough that Shen Yuan can't see- well- he can't see, uh, lower than–

"... Binghe," he starts.

"I WILL RETURN LATER!" Binghe yells, and scrambles first on all fours to the door, managing to get onto his two feet before he reaches it.

“Binghe!” Shen Yuan throws the blanket off of him and moves to follow, only to freeze as the door slams shut. Though that’s not why he stopped. It’s only, um. Well. It’s just. He was going to tell Binghe that it’s totally normal and doesn’t make him any less of a stallion protagonist, he *is* fourteen after all, but–

Slowly, Shen Yuan sits down and puts a pillow in his lap.

Apparently he’s suffering from the same affliction.

Face bright red, Shen Yuan wonders if maybe it *is* time to sleep in different beds after all.

Normally when Binghe leaves, they hug.

Today they instead awkwardly exchange bows, their eyes not meeting. Shen Yuan still braided Binghe’s hair that morning, but their words had been stilted and blushing had come to them both easily.

Ning Yingying, who is only blindly oblivious when it suits her, notices it and handles it with all the grace of a bulldozer.

“What was that?” she asks as Binghe flies away.

“Nothing,” Shen Yuan replies and smooths out his robes and forces a cheerful smile on his face, “let us go to class!”

Obviously *that* doesn’t work out very well.

After suffering through a day of Ning Yingying poking him at the speed and consistency a true master would envy and, as such, reminding Shen Yuan of the worst parts of having had siblings in a different life–

He makes his escape to An Ding Peak.

Mu Qingfang won’t expect him for a while yet, and besides, Shen Yuan heard there’s been

some *trouble* with the brewery peak that led to some unfortunate bodily fluids. So he feels safe in grabbing Fu Yue and flying off to An Ding Peak, and knows that Ning Yingying won't follow him because she disrupted every class in her quest to make him talk, which means she is, for once in her life, in actual trouble.

Should he maybe ask Airplane to have a sleepover?

They haven't managed to have one, have they? Usually Mu Qingfang is free, and Yue Qingyuan is always happy to make time when he can, but Airplane *is* on the list so it wouldn't be weird! It would give them time to talk! About, uh, stuff! Like the Endless Abyss and also maybe the approaching demon invasion *and* it has been a while since Shen Yuan came over to heal Shang Qinghua anyway, and…

And look, it's totally okay to be gay. It's fine! He's not against it! But after having touched Binghe's- sure there were pants in the way, but still, it, uh. It would be nice to *not* be around the gay men? Okay??? What if they know. What if they, somehow, *know* just by looking at him!?

Shen Yuan would rather die. No one can know the best friend and sidekick touched the future heavenly pillar. *No one.*

The flight to An Ding Peak is a smooth downward arc, trailing between peaks. It is the fourth ranked, but not the fourth one from Qiong Ding. Shen Yuan takes the time to enjoy the scenery and the soft, quiet joy of Fu Yue as they do, the air cold against his cheeks and hands tucked safely away inside his sleeves. It is a very nice distraction.

No one pays much mind to him landing on An Ding Peak; not because they're used to *him,* but because everyone is always too busy doing something else. And Airplane told him that half the time, people don't mind guests passing through as long as said guests aren't idiots stopping by to complain or cause trouble.

So Shen Yuan sheathes Fu Yue and stays out of the way of everyone, and is just glad there's no gawkers on An Ding Peak. They're too *busy* for that, thank the fuck. At least Qian Cao Peak is used to him by now, compared to Qiong Ding which still seems to think the rumors are true, the ones about Shen Yuan being the love child of… anyway.

No gay shit! No more!

Shen Yuan makes his way to the house of Airplane. It, much like the bamboo house of Qing Jing, is of a simple design. Not as gracefully cool, obviously, or magnificent as the manor of Qiong Ding. It's more business casual. A swooping roof, tiles laid neatly and spotless, the house itself made up of light brown bricks that has some kind of ivy climbing up the sides. It has a charm to it. It's nice. It makes it easier to focus on what's at hand, rather than what has happened. It doesn't look like the kind of house that Airplane would stay in, or the kind that the original Shang Qinghua would have been satisfied with, the greedy edgelord that he was.

He doesn't bother with knocking.

“Hua-shishu,” Shen Yuan calls out as he pulls the door open, and then squawks as *something* is slapped onto his forehead. He stumbles backwards, hands covering his hair, and stares at Airplane, who stares back with a hand still raised. “Dude,” Shen Yuan says, “what the *fuck?”*

“Fuck!” Shang Qinghua shouts and yanks him inside, slamming the door shut behind him, “oh, you’re here at the worst fucking time, holy shit–”

“What did you put on me!?” Shen Yuan rips it off, and is greeted with a talisman of- uh. Bells? Warning? Shit, he doesn’t recognize this one. He drops it when Airplane keeps dragging him inside, both of them nearly tripping on the carpet on the way, “dude!”

“It’s a temporary warning system,” Shang Qinghua says, and then he shoves Shen Yuan into a storage closet, “stay!”

“What- Airplane!” he protests, managing to get a foot stuck in the doorway before the other can close it, his heart beating, “what’s going on? Don’t put me in here, it’s–” dark, cramped, *awful–*

“Mobei-Jun is on his way and he’s *pissed,”* Shang Qinghua says, eyes wide and face pale, “forget Bingge and Shen Qingqiu, *he* is going to rip your arms off, bro, if he catches you here! I can’t let that happen! I don’t know how to cover up the fucking murder of *you!?* Like, seriously, I bet everyone knows you went here, I’ll be the first suspect, oh my fucking *god* why are you so fucking noticeable!”

Mobei-Jun? Here? But–

While Shen Yuan is distracted, Shang Qinghua kicks his foot inside and slams the door shut, instantly washing the small space in pitch black darkness. Shen Yuan stands frozen there, hands against the door, toes aching from where Airplane kicked him.

Why would Mobei-Jun be pissed? Why would Airplane *know* he was angry? Is- is it okay to just hide here? Why the fuck didn’t Airplane push him *out* of the house instead of yanking him inside?

Will he be okay?

It’s so dark.

Shen Yuan presses his brow against the door and focuses on his breathing. He closes his eyes, and his heart is beating like crazy and his hands itch with warmth. Which is *not* helpful. Fuck. Okay. What can he do? There is the sound of Shang Qinghua shuffling about, moving things and muttering to himself. Is he putting up more of those weird talismans? Is there time for Shen Yuan to leave? To sneak out before Mobei-Jun gets there?

Will Airplane be alright?

The decision is taken from him at the sound of Shang Qinghua’s yelp.

“My King!” Shen Yuan hears, and his breath catches.

He stands there, heart like a sprinting rabbit in his chest, ears straining to hear Mobei-Jun. But that’s his thing, isn’t it? The one who comes and goes like shadows, the only one capable of standing by Demon Lord Luo Binghe’s side. Why *would* Shen Yuan be able to hear him? That would be OOC. Except- except–

“Haha,” Shang Qinghua laughs nervously, “would- would my King want some Dragon-Bone Cantaloupe seeds? They are a Cang Qiong Mountain sect speciality–” there is the sound of a crash and shattering porcelain. “Right! Right, no, of course not! This lowly one will, uh, just clean that up! Of course seeds are an inferior snack to my King, this one- this one apologizes for the mistake, please show mercy to this lowly one!”

“Shang Qinghua,” a voice like rumbling thunder growls and it’s close. It’s close enough that Shen Yuan wants to step away from the door, but the mere thought of being heard keeps him frozen where he is. “Explain.”

Thump, thump, what must be the sound of knees against the floor as Shang Qinghua throws himself into a kowtow.

“It was an accident, my King! There was nothing this one could do, though of course this one *tried,* however when demons are caught by cultivators-” a growl, loud and warning, and Shen Yuan bites his lip, “if- if this one could have ensured it, of course the demons would have survived! This humble one knows they were there to assist this one in the task–”

“Huan Hua Palace.”

“R-Right. Right! Yes, this one had no idea they were there! Please believe this lowly one, my King!”

Huan Hua Palace? Demons? What the fuck did Airplane *do.* Shen Yuan hadn’t even known he was away from the sect! What- there’s suddenly a slam against the door; Shen Yuan jumps backwards before he can think better of it, and narrowly avoids falling over when he knocks into something. Shang Qinghua’s voice, when it speaks next, is strangled and much, much too close to the door.

“This one is forever loyal, my King! Of course this one would have assisted in killing those- uh, those filthy Huan Hua people, b-but there was an ambush and the demons were outnumbered and- ow! Ow, have mercy! Mercy!”

Shen Yuan takes a step forward before he can think better of it, heart in throat, *is Airplane hurt?* and–

Something falls with a loud clatter in the dark room.

Silence.

There is a shriek as Shang Qinghua is thrown away, and then the door is ripped open; the

sudden light is blinding, and Shen Yuan stumbles away from it, mind blank with panic as a towering shadow fills the doorway, ice blue pupils meeting his like eerie pinpricks of pure murder.

Oh shit, he thinks, before Mobei-Jun grabs him.

The hand *squeezes* as he is yanked out of the storage room and picked up, legs dangling. Shen Yuan kicks and chokes and claws fruitlessly at the hand holding him, his wide eyes meeting the cold gaze of Mobei-Jun, and seeing how the demon is- is just *looking* at him, squeezing slowly instead of quickly snapping his neck, it's- it's–

And then Shang Qinghua throws himself onto the arm holding Shen Yuan up, sudden enough to make Mobei-Jun stagger, eyes dark as night widening before they narrow into a furious glare.

He doesn't let go of Shen Yuan. Instead, he uses his other hand to try and tug Shang Qinghua off of him.

"My King, stop! Stop, hold up!" Shang Qinghua cries, stubbornly holding on, clothes tearing when Mobei-Jun's claws pierce through fabric in the struggle, "let go! I beg of you! Please! It's- he's too important, my King can't–!"

Shen Yuan drops to the floor with a loud *thud!* and for a moment all he can do is try to breathe. It's hard. It's *impossible.* His throat feels too tight, his lungs too small, and Shen Yuan clutches at his neck and feels his eyes sting as he tries to remember how to *breathe* even as Shang Qinghua is thrown to the floor next to him. Through tears, Shen Yuan can barely make out Shang Qinghua scrambling into a kowtow between them, hair escaping his Peak Lord crown and the back of his robes torn and ragged.

And beyond that, there is Mobei-Jun, towering above them.

"Why was Qinghua hiding a spy?" he asks, and the growl would have been better than *this.* This cold fury, the way his voice is so terribly, horrifyingly even. It reminds Shen Yuan of quick hands and sweet tongues and he *really* doesn't want to think about her, now, when he can't even breathe.

"Not a spy! He's- he's just a child, my King, this one swears it!" Shang Qinghua says, and when black ice spreads out from Mobei-Jun, he nearly *shrieks* with, "but an important one! His absence will be noticed, my King! Don't kill him! Or, uh, maim! Or anything! That would be very bad, for all of us and *especially* for my duty of being my King's spy!"

"And Qinghua still expects this one to believe the deaths of this one's subjects were an accident?" Mobei-Jun asks, the ice crawling closer, and Shen Yuan can see his own breath in panicked puffs of white clouds. Even the heat trembling inside his veins feels smothered by the chill in the air. Is that demonic qi? It's so fucking *cold.*

"Well," Shang Qinghua begins–

“When he hides a cultivator child from this one, and asks for mercy?”

Mobei-Jun’s eyes land on Shen Yuan.

“What is so important that disposing of it will cause such trouble?” the demon asks, and Shen Yuan can feel his own heart *stutter.*

“Peak Lord son!”

What.

“What,” Mobei-Jun says, echoing Shen Yuan’s thoughts.

“He’s- he’s Shen Qingqiu’s son,” Shang Qinghua says, the fucking *liar,* what the fuck! For a brief, crazy moment, Shen Yuan almost kicks him in his still kowtowing rear for it, before sanity returns and he instead tugs his knees against his body, making himself small and hiding the way his hands tremble, “this is Shen Yuan, the son of Qing Jing’s Peak Lord, and as Shen Qingqiu is the second Peak Lord of this sect, surely my King can see how bad it would be if his son died here, yes? And! And, well, this one is his favorite uncle, haha, that is why he was visiting, and this one simply didn’t- that is- it was impulse? To put him in the storage?”

Favorite uncle???

Mobei-Jun stares down at them both. His face is blank, but his fingers twitch like he wants to grab Shang Qinghua and shake him. Or rip his face off. Both are a possibility. Shen Yuan doesn’t know how to heal someone’s face from being ripped off. He hopes that’s not it.

He might be hyperventilating.

“Qinghua can ensure this child won’t speak of this one?” Mobei-Jun demands.

“Of course, my King! Please- please let this lowly one kick him out, or- or put him back in the room, until my King is satisfied with this one’s loyalty!”

Wait. Wait no-

“Don’t,” Shen Yuan chokes out, and then gets a hand slammed over his mouth for his troubles. It’s gross and sweaty, and he tries to jerk away from it. But Shang Qinghua stubbornly keeps his hand right there, his other one at the back of Shen Yuan’s head and it makes his skin crawl, having someone’s hand touching his hair. But Shang Qinghua is pale and sweating and there’s a glint in Mobei-Jun’s eyes that freezes Shen Yuan in place once more.

“Fine,” the demon says, “this one shall allow the child to be put back where he crawled from,” as if the asshole didn’t *grab him, fuck off,* “if this *Shen Yuan* still speaks of what he has seen…”

Mobei-Jun doesn't need to finish the sentence.

"Thank you, my King! Thank you! This one, ah, this lowly one will just- just put him back in," Shang Qinghua says, getting to his feet and dragging Shen Yuan up with him.

Shen Yuan should shut up. He shouldn't say *anything,* and he knows it. Shang Qinghua tugs him towards the storage and the dark shadows within it, and Shen Yuan's eyes catch on the man's throat. There's red marks all over it, from where Mobei-Jun must have grabbed him. Matching ones to Shen Yuan's own, except there's tiny beads of blood on Airplane where claws pierced skin.

"I can help," Shen Yuan blurts out, "don't- he will-"

"Shut up," Airplane snaps, sharper than anything he has ever said, and Shen Yuan nearly bites his tongue in shock, "I'm keeping you alive, you idiot!"

"B-But," Shen Yuan's eyes darts to Mobei-Jun and he flinches back at how the demon unblinkingly stares at them, waiting, biding his time, "he's going to hurt you, or- or worse–!"

Shang Qinghua grabs his shoulders and shakes him.

"I don't care! *You* are the child, alright!?" he hisses, "I'm the adult here! Let me handle this, you-"

"I can *help!"*

"No you can't!" Shang Qinghua yells, "you are a fucking *child,* bro! You can't do shit! Now let me save your ass!"

For the second time that day, Shen Yuan is shoved into a dark room.

The door slams shut and no matter how he tries, he can't get it open.

In the end, all he can do is wait.

And listen.

It's awful.

Shen Yuan is really obviously trying not to cry. He looks like he ate a lemon for the first time and is now suffering through the betrayal of not having been warned beforehand, all while his little baby face is scrunched up and red and stupid looking. LMAO, one could say, if one wasn't Shang Qinghua and felt maybe a little bit bad about it.

"Well, y'know," he says, "at least nothing is broken!"

Other than his pride and that one bowl that Mobei-Jun smacked out of his hands like the rude bitch he is. Ugh, the pieces are still on the floor. Scattered all over the place, mingling with the melon seeds, looking like the worst kind of cumshot. Or, uh, something less NSFW. The aftermath of titanic? With all the bodies floating around in the cold, cold sea? Or Shang Qinghua's tears, the ones he won't shed because he's… busy.

"You don't know that," Cucumber-bro says, holding Shang Qinghua's very swollen wrist that hurts more than being electrocuted ever did, yikes.

The little guy *is* right though. Shang Qinghua might be riding the high of adrenaline, which dulls the pain a little. But only a little, because holy shit does it all hurt. But he doesn't feel any *sharp* pain which is very good. At one point, he had thought his King was about to go Bingge on him and tear his arms off.

The smackdown was highly preferred. Hurt like a bitch, but at least he can still write! As the god of this world, he feels like having both arms is his, haha, god-given right. Gotta take what you can get and all that!

"I'm pretty sure of it though," Shang Qinghua says instead, and watches as the swelling goes down, the angry red softening to a cherry blossom pink, Shen Yuan's qi undoing weeks of healing in just a few moments, "bro, you're such a cheat. If only I could shrink you down and put you in my pocket! Like a first aid kit."

Shen Yuan grimaces.

"Ew," the boy says, and Shang Qinghua abruptly remembers that he wrote that one chapter once about a wife who shrank and *literally* rode Luo Binghe's dick. He snickers, then yelps when Shen Yuan pinches his wrist.

"Bro! Ow!"

"Oh, good, there's no numbness," Shen Yuan says, and almost looks like his normal self, if one ignores how pale and wide-eyed he is, or how his eyes are lined with red from not-crying in the storage.

What a mess.

If one ignores the shattered bowl and all the scattered seeds, everything looks normal. The rug is in its place, all his paperwork is still piled high onto the desk. Outside, the sun is shining. Inside, it's not as cold as it was just a little bit ago. There is ice melting on the floor;

Shang Qinghua's eyes linger on it, the last spot that Mobei-Jun stood on before he left as quietly as he had arrived.

That had been a close one.

"... why was… why was he so angry?" Shen Yuan asks, taking Shang Qinghua's other hand. He begins to twist and turn it, slowly making the fingers bend. The scratches on that hand isn't from today, but rather from the mission Shang Qinghua returned from. He doesn't say that though. Instead he lets Cucumber-bro check him over, one finger at a time.

"Was gonna do a little errand for him during one of my outings," Shang Qinghua says and tests moving his newly healed wrist, "and he likes to send out some minions for that, which is *actually* helpful sometimes. But, uh. Huan Hua goons showed up."

It had been gorey as- well, *very gorey.* The Huan Hua cultivators had outnumbered the demons to the point it looked like a whole damn ambush party, as if it was all planned. He had only seen one tiny fox demon escaping with the use of some fancy illusion magic. So it had left Shang Qinghua scrambling to act like a rogue cultivator instead of a whole damn Peak Lord (look, Cang Qiong Mountain is too cool to owe a favor to *Huan Hua Palace* alright! That's just wrong!) and also he absolutely failed to get his hands on the artifact that Mobei-Jun had wanted.

So just an epic fail.

"So- so it looked like you betrayed him?" Shen Yuan says, a furrow between his brows that makes him look even more like Shen Qingqiu. Who was… about to come out, wasn't he? Like, out of the caves. Like a murderous butterfly, all done cultivating, metamorphosis complete! And Liu Qingge wasn't dead, so maybe they both *actually* advanced this time. Neither of them did in the original.

For obvious reasons.

"Yup," Shang Qinghua says, then, "by the way, demon invasion is soon, right? Sha Hualing? Is the System telling you to be there or be a square, or what?"

"I don't know," Cucumber-bro says, shifty-eyed.

Wow. Hold up.

"Is your System *still* muted? Bro!"

"It's annoying!" Shen Yuan defends himself, "and never helpful!"

"Obviously! But bro, if you can avoid being there, that would be *great,* wouldn't it?"

"Binghe will be there," Shen Yuan huffs, and reaches his little gremlin paws at Shang Qinghua's face, "so of course I will be too! Stay still, your lip is bleeding again." Oh, so that's why it stings. Remembering the many times Shen Yuan warned him of face paralysis,

Shang Qinghua decides to shut up.

“Dude, you *better* not plan to be at the Conference at least,” he complains the moment Shen Yuan removes his hands, lip apparently not bleeding anymore. It still stings, but not in a *ouch, wound open* way, more just- straining. “You don’t have the protagonist’s halo like my son does. You will *totally* die.”

“You’re still going to let him do it?”

Shang Qinghua blinks; he looks at Shen Yuan, who is glaring at him, eyes narrowed into angry, wet looking slivers of green. Shang Qinghua hesitates. The lack of answer makes Shen Yuan sneer, *truly* looking like a tiny Shen Qingqiu as he does.

“He hurt you! All the time!” the boy bursts out, and then he leaps to his feet and begins pacing back and forth, hands clenching and unclenching, as if wishing he had claws instead to rip and tear with, “why must the Conference even happen? Can’t we *all* skip it? Why must we go there! Why can’t- why can’t you sabotage it, like, for the demons too, not just *our* side!? Can’t- what if-” Shen Yuan’s voice breaks, and Shang Qinghua sits there, frozen, watching the fourteen year old screw his face up like he is about to cry, balling up the sleeves in his fists, wrinkling the fabric, “what if s-someone catches you? What if you fuck up, and he- he beats you *again* and- and-”

Shen Yuan stops and hides his face, shoulders trembling.

Shang Qinghua doesn’t know what to do.

Comfort isn’t something he has ever *done.* Not for others, barely even for himself in either lifetime. He knows he should do something right now. Logically, he should be helping Shen Yuan calm down. But how does one *do that?*

He’s not a hugger. So it’s surprising, when he finds himself tugging Shen Yuan into one. It’s not a very *good* hug- stiff, and dumb, and Shen Yuan tenses up. But before Shang Qinghua can change his mind, he sobs even harder and hugs back.

Well, shit.

“You’re getting snot on me,” he says, and is almost relieved when Shen Yuan viciously rubs his snotty, wet face harder against his shoulder. It hurts, just a bit, but not enough that he will tell the guy. Shang Qinghua can handle keeping some bruises to himself.

They stay like that for a bit. It’s awkward, and he keeps wondering if he’s doing it right. It feels like he should move his arms, but what if he does it wrong? So he just keeps them there, stiffly held around Shen Yuan in the worst hug of all time.

“.... System won’t let me cancel the Conference,” he says after a while, when Shen Yuan has pulled away and is rubbing his face clean with a handkerchief that Shang Qinghua handed to him, Shen Yuan all the while aggressively pretending like he didn’t just cry all over him. What a little loser, Shang Qinghua thinks, and his heart twinges. “Sorry, bro.”

Shen Yuan sniffles.

“Not your fault,” he mumbles, and then adds, “I’m- I’m spending the night here, just so you know.”

It’s not said like a question, but the boy’s voice trembles and the way he refuses to make eye contact says a lot. Shang Qinghua opens his mouth to tell him no, to ask why he won’t stay with the other two uncles he wrapped around his little finger. And then he remembers a lifetime ago, listening to his parents scream at each other for years before they finally divorced. They never beat each other up, but- but it had always been a little scary.

“Yeah, whatever,” he says instead, and Shen Yuan’s shoulders slumps with relief.

Shang Qinghua misses being the only transmigrator.

Things were much easier when all he had to worry about was himself.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *uses a fan*
LBH: surely this won't awaken anything in me!
Later That Night:

haha :D look guys a new chapter! A bit late, yes, but here it is! Gosh, wasn't that fun? :) Moshang is Moshang, and part of their talent is to be worse at communicating/trusting than even BingQiu. A true feat!

I also managed to get yet another friend into svsss! Hi Mads *waves* the sinner who hasn't read volume 4 before reading this fic..... I shame thee in the notes, that's right. You and everyone else!!! Go!!! Go read the side stories!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (please. i love them, if you can but haven't, pls read them)

Anyway thank you for the patience!!! I hope you all have had a good day and if not, that this made it a little tiny bit better <3

FANART!! GUYS!!!

Lian-nt drew this cute callback to the LQG and YQY notes from way back :D

Quest-draws made this masterpiece of Binghe suffering???? Love to see it.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Unmute System?)

Yes / No

(System has been unmuted!)

(+｡:.　THANK ヽ(*´∀)ﾉ°YOU.:｡+　)

“Shut *up.*”

“Xiao-Shen is growing into a little heartbreaker!”

Wei Qingwei’s words from the previous day linger in Mu Qingfang’s mind, easy to recall as he watches Zhu Kang hover nearby, distracted when he should be focused on tending to the fanged mushrooms. If the boy does not watch where he puts his fingers, it is not chicken bones that will be gnawed on.

Shen Yuan appears oblivious to the glances which Zhu Kang sneaks; he sits next to Mu Qingfang on the bench, methodically peeling the golden chestnuts which Wei Qingwei had brought with him from his trip. They are far easier to peel than regular chestnuts, though gold stains both his and Shen Yuan’s fingers as they work, the peels piling up between them.

There are no medical uses for them. It is simply a fancy autumn treat, nuts waiting to be roasted and eaten, one which Shen Yuan confessed to having seen but never tasted before.

The boy’s hair is loosely tied back, barely pinned in place by a wooden hairpin. He looks young and focused, though Mu Qingfang can remember having his own teenage crush once upon a time on a cheerful boy that would not stop appearing in the oddest places. The cheeks flushed pink from the cold air must be very distracting for poor Zhu Kang, alongside the stray hair that Shen Yuan keeps blowing out of his face whenever it drifts close enough to his mouth.

Shen Qingqiu is a handsome man, but a frigid one. As a teenager, his personality had put everyone off, his insincere smiles, hot temper and underhanded tricks quickly outweighing what one would otherwise appreciate of his appearance. Shen Yuan is a gentler soul, smiling

easily, tone polite and his resting face that of a focused scholar despite his young age.

Mu Qingfang can only pity the poor youths of Cang Qiong Mountain, for Wei Qingwei is right. Zhu Kang is not the only boy who so clearly admires Shen Yuan. With Shen Qingqiu gone, he earns more longing glances every day.

There have been many times that Mu Qingfang has watched, bemused, as boys from not only Qian Cao Peak, but also from other peaks, have made fools of themselves in front of the boy next to him.

Wan Jian Peak disciples eagerly showing off whenever Shen Yuan has accompanied Mu Qingfang on visits to Wei Qingwei; boys from An Ding asking Shen Yuan if, perhaps, he has any requests of his own to order when such a young disciple has no right to do so. Lin Jie of Bai Zhan Peak has certainly warmed up to Shen Yuan as well, though it is unclear whether it is in a romantic sense or simply because Shen Yuan provides the feral child with food. There have been more- too many to keep count of. They bravely venture forward and none have managed to break through the obliviousness that Shen Yuan wields.

It is quite amusing.

Eventually, Zhu Kang leaves to attend to his other duties, after earning a smile from Shen Yuan that has Zhu Kang straighten his back with joy.

Silence falls between them as they are left alone. Only the snapping sound of peeling the golden chestnuts can be heard for a moment. If Mu Qingfang was to let his hearing sharpen, he knows he would be able to hear beyond the walls of the garden, the distant sounds of hurrying feet, the grinding of herbs and bottling of healing elixirs. But the outside is of no concern today.

Shen Yuan looks tired.

It is something which Mu Qingfang had taken note of the previous day, when Shen Yuan had finally returned. Three nights he had spent with Shang Qinghua, an abrupt change of plans which Mu Qingfang had not questioned. It had been a good thing, he thought, to allow the boy to take charge of his own decisions.

But the green eyes are rimmed red, and Shen Yuan’s movements are sluggish. There is no fever, no sign of sickness. At first glance, it appears to be simply a lack of sleep. If one were to ignore how glued to the books of healing he has become. If one turns a blind eye to how the boy keeps staring towards the direction of An Ding Peak.

When the silence breaks, Mu Qingfang is not surprised.

“... Shishu?” Shen Yuan says.

“Yes?” Mu Qingfang replies, careful to not look up even as the silence returns and drags on. Shen Yuan is rolling a chestnut around in his hands, the golden dust on the shell quickly spreading across his palms.

“Is it easy to change peaks?” he then asks, and Mu Qingfang pauses.

“Why is Shizhi asking?” he replies evenly.

“Well,” Shen Yuan says, trying to sound casual and falling short, “this one has come to the realization that, ah, that physical cultivation does not come easily to this one. But Shishu has said that this one has shown a talent for healing…”

“It is true that Shizhi has shown promise in the healing arts,” Mu Qingfang agrees. It is a good thing that he sat so that his good eye could see Shen Yuan without turning his head.

The boy fidgets.

“Right,” Shen Yuan says, “and- and with how often this one assists with Lin Jie of Bai Zhan Peak, or- or even Shang-shishu… and this one *tries* to help Shijie, but she doesn’t want to be healed, as- as if bruises are *cool* or something,” he says, annoyance winding its way through his words before he sharply pulls it back, like ripping out unwanted weeds, voice going back to almost-casual, “and I just- I mean, this one thought that- that maybe this one should change. To this peak. Instead of Qing Jing, that is. Because healing is… important.”

It would be a lie to say the thought wasn’t pleasing.

Shen Yuan has a sharp mind and is intuitive to what one may need for the simple ailments, understanding what home remedies are useful and which ones are not. He is not an expert on flora, but he has shown great promise in remembering what parts of beasts one can use in the name of the healing arts. Together with his growing control of his abnormally plentiful qi–

It would be a good match. Far better, indeed, than Qing Jing Peak.

“If Yuan-shizhi wished to join Bai Zhan Peak, this master would not stop him,” Mu Qingfang says, “as disciples must come to them, rather than be chosen. However… it is not so simple for other peaks.”

Shen Yuan had perked up at the start; but at the last sentence, he falters. He frowns, and thoughtlessly tucks away the stray lock of hair, leaving golden stains against the curve of his cheek.

“In what way?”

“There must be an agreement between the Lords of the two peaks in question,” Mu Qingfang explains, “though at times, when an agreement can’t be made, Qingyuan-shixiong would be able to make the decision instead.”

He does not have to elaborate. What little hope remained now flees as Shen Yuan sighs and looks down onto his hands.

Shen Qingqiu is a possessive man; he is also aware of the politics between peaks, and it

appears that Shen Yuan has an inkling as well. While there are no claims of blood ties between them, their similarities are enough to cause gossip. If Shen Yuan then abruptly changes peaks… it would not matter if he had shown talent for healing.

The rumors would be damaging to both of their reputations.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan mumbles.

“I was of the impression that Yuan-er liked Qing Jing Peak,” Mu Qingfang says, “was this master wrong?”

“No- well- yes, I like it there,” Shen Yuan huffs and rubs at his tired eyes, more golden dust sweeping across his face. Mu Qingfang hands over a handkerchief, but the boy simply holds it in hands, giving it a confused frown as he continues, “I’m just- I’m just not good at most of the things there. Not that I’m *bad* either! But I could be better, obviously, and- and I just- I want to help Sha- uh, I want to be useful. As quickly as possible. And if Shishu says this one has a talent for healing… would that not mean I would improve quicker, studying that instead?”

These were not concerns which Shen Yuan had last time he stayed over, nor did he seem worried about such things on the day they agreed he would stay with Mu Qingfang, before the boy made the abrupt decision to stay with An Ding Peak’s Lord instead.

“... is this related to Shang Qinghua?” he asks.

Shen Yuan flinches.

“Ah,” Mu Qingfang mildly says, “it is. This master is aware that Shang-shixiong has a tendency to collect injuries. Shizhi spent these past nights with him- does Shang-shixiong need healing that Shizhi is unable to give?”

“He’s… he’s fine,” Shen Yuan says, looking away, “perfectly fine! He… he was just bruised, and I know how to heal bruises now.” The boy hesitates. Mu Qingfang waits. “And it’s not only him, of course,” Shen Yuan finally says, forced cheer in his voice, “Shijie goes out of her way to collect bruises these days, and that’s not good!”

“It is very Bai Zhan Peak of her,” Mu Qingfang agrees, “it is good to keep an eye on her, but… Yuan-shizhi.” He waits until the boy looks at him.

It is slow and reluctant, Shen Yuan’s thin frame braced for the worst with how stiffly he holds himself. Mu Qingfang wonders where the boy was, before he joined the sect. Who made him so quick to assume violence?

“One cannot help those who don't want to be helped,” Mu Qingfang says, as gently as he knows how. Shen Yuan’s nails dig into the hard shell of the chestnut in his hand. It is the last one that needs peeling.

“Sometimes people are stupid,” the boy bites out.

Mu Qingfang knows very well how true that statement is. Shen Qingqiu has not let anyone examine him since he first joined the sect; Yue Qingyuan's meridians are ethereal and hard to grasp, Liu Qingge nearly qi deviated within the caves and still refused to break his seclusion.

"Yes," he agrees, and smiles at how Shen Yuan blinks at him, startled by the answer, "but it is important to respect their will as much as possible. If they cannot trust their healer, then who can they trust? And," he continues, "it is not Yuan-er's responsibility to care for Shang-shixiong."

Shen Yuan stares at him.

There is a stubborn clench to his jaw, Mu Qingfang notes. The words have been heard, but they have not been accepted.

It is a good start, he hopes.

"Now," Mu Qingfang says and stands up, "shall we roast these? Wei-ge should arrive soon. It will be a good welcome."

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose, the way he often does when Mu Qingfang calls the man *Wei-ge*. As if he is uncertain whether he has the right to be embarrassed or not.

But the subject has been dropped, allowing the boy time to process.

"And Yuan-er should know, he has gold dust on his face," Mu Qingfang adds and smiles as Shen Yuan hurriedly begins to wipe at his face, cheeks red.

(Quest: Demonic Invasion of the Immortal's Mountain.
Time Remaining Until the Quest Begins: 30 Days!)

Ugh.

Shen Yuan watches that stupid, blue window hover before him. Even now, it is literally counting down the seconds, minutes and hours. Thirty days- a whole month. It should be a lot of time to prepare.

It feels like nothing.

What can he even do in thirty days? He can't stop it, can't prevent a whole damn demon invasion. Shen Yuan knows that Yue Qingyuan will be gone at the time, and he knows Shen

Qingqiu will leave the caves but that's about it. There isn't- the countdown is just there to stress him out, damn it. *He hates it.* Why did he unmute the stupid thing?

"Bro," Shang Qinghua says on the other side of the desk, and Shen Yuan flinches as the man taps his nose with the wood end of the brush in his hand, "stop that."

Shen Yuan huffs and swats it away.

"I'm not even doing anything," he says, tugging his book closer. The chapter he is on is detailing how to increase the adrenaline in one's body. Obviously it's said in more fancy wuxia terms, but Shen Yuan is pretty sure it's the equivalent of an epipen. But with qi.

It's not what he needs to know, but it's still interesting.

"Uh-huh. Sure, that too," Airplane says, and leans back with a groan, "you do know that if you keep hanging out here, Yue Qingyuan is going to get jealous? Right? And sad. I don't want to deal with his sad dog eyes, or having to fight for the gege title. I don't even want it!"

"I'm not here that often," Shen Yuan lies, "and I'm not even bothering you, am I?" He falters. "... right?"

Shang Qinghua grimaces.

"Forget sad dog eyes, those are sad *puppy* eyes," he mutters.

"What?"

"Nothing, bro. I'm just saying, you spend too much time here. It's sus! Once Shen Qingqiu is out, he's going to accuse me of poaching his disciples and then kill me in his sleep."

Shen Yuan's lips twitch into a smile.

"Don't you mean your sleep?"

"Nah, I believe in his ability to murder."

Shen Yuan hums and looks back down at the book. He traces the letters in it, swirls of ink in signs that he still sometimes fuck up when it comes to writing. Modern hanzi is different from the kind in this world. Sometimes, his brain gets confused and Shen Yuan ends up making an abomination. Or stares too long at one while reading. It's stupid.

He peeks back at Shang Qinghua.

Now, two weeks later, Airplane doesn't look hurt at all. There is a furrow between his brows as he compares two different reports, his hair bun slightly askew from when he ditched the crown and replaced it with a simple ribbon. There are no bruises mottling the skin; not even scratches. He looks perfectly safe.

Shen Yuan's eyes drift towards the closest shadow.

Nothing.

He looks back down at the book, the words swimming. Binghe should be back soon, though. It will be easier to sleep then. Even if they are going to sleep in different beds, surely it will be better than not sleeping in the same room at all? Clearly Shen Yuan is just missing his own bedroom. There is no other reason for being this tired.

Shen Yuan takes another peek at Shang Qinghua; only this time, their eyes meet and the man scoffs.

"Bro, it's *fine."*

"I'm not worried," Shen Yuan denies, hurriedly averting his eyes.

"Oh yeah? Why are you here then? To help me with paperwork?" Shang Qinghua asks, waving a scroll around. White for Bai Zhan Peak, Shen Yuan thinks, watching the ribbon tied around it.

"You- you've been too busy! But since you have time for *nagging me,* I'm here for- for brainstorming."

Airplane squints at him.

"Brainstorming," he echoes, and Shen Yuan nods as if he didn't totally just make up that excuse.

"For the Abyss! And the invasion. Of Sha Hualing, you know, since the System says there's thirty days left. I know you're not very strong, despite being a peak lord, but *surely* you can be of some use for the invasion?"

"Bro," Shang Qinghua sighs, slumping as if someone just put the weight of the world onto his shoulders, "I'm not *that* weak, not all of us can be war gods! Okay! Also that's *not* how to butter me up, dude, insulting me? Dude. Bro. I'm not into tsunderes-"

"I am *not* a tsundere!"

"-and also, there's no point. I'm not going to be here for that. System got a countdown for *me* as well."

Wait, what? So Shang Qinghua was given missions that didn't match the plot? Or perhaps it was like a stage preparation. How else would the Immortal Conference go to shit? But… if he was *leaving*...

"Are you- are you going- going to be with *him?"* Shen Yuan asks, holding the book closer to himself. He doesn't know what to make of the look Shang Qinghua sends him; it's uncomfortable and twitchy, but not scared. It almost looks guilty, except it falls a step short

from it.

“It’s fine,” Airplane says, “it’s not usually that bad, bro. And he doesn’t do it during active missions anyway, unless I *really* fuck up. Would be bothersome if his spy couldn’t move as he should, y’know?”

Shen Yuan stares at him.

Whatever expression he has on his face, it makes Shang Qinghua wince and look away.

“I won’t make him mad,” the man says, “so stop worrying about this, and just- just go back to your own peak. It’s *fine.”*

It’s not, though. Mobei-Jun can show up anywhere, whenever he wants. He can enter Cang Qiong Mountain without even setting off the wards and he has been- for *years* he has beaten –

“Promise to come to me when you get back,” Shen Yuan says instead, voice wobbly and cracking embarrassingly in the middle, “or at least go to Mu Qingfang, if you’re hurt.”

The words only seem to make Airplane more uncomfortable. *Good,* Shen Yuan thinks, and forces himself to stare at the man until he yields.

“Only if you promise to not get mauled by Sha Hualing,” Shang Qinghua replies, scratching his nose and averting his gaze, “or any of her evil little minions.”

“Weren’t they very big?”

“Okay, so don’t get *squished* by her giant evil minions,” Shang Qinghua amends, “deal? Survive and thrive, yeah?”

“Survive and thrive,” Shen Yuan agrees, and can’t help but huff a laugh when Shang Qinghua holds his hand out for a fistbump. He looks so *stupid.* Like a lame teacher trying to be cool with the youth. And yet–

Shen Yuan has to stretch a bit to reach.

Survive and thrive, he thinks, as their knuckles connect.

It almost sounds cool.

Only a few leaves still cling to the tree branches; vibrant red and orange, fluttering as the wind breezes through, tugging at them. And yet they hold on, stubborn despite the quickly approaching winter.

Shen Yuan yawns and lets his head fall against Binghe's shoulder. The other boy rests his own against Shen Yuan's in turn, shifting in such a way that lets Shen Yuan get more comfortable.

Luo Binghe only just got back.

It must have been a difficult one; Shen Yuan is too tired to ask for details, but Binghe seems *exhausted.* How either of them managed to muster the energy to walk all the way to their tree, he doesn't know.

"-and look here, look, A-Luo, this bruise is *so* big, this one got it two days ago when those guys from Bai Zhan Peak showed up again–"

Nevermind, he *does* know. It's because Ning Yingying is full of energy like the hyperactive wife material she is, and she had insisted on them eating apples by the tree. Why? Apparently to pull her sleeves back to show off her collection of bruises. Blue and purple and green littering her body, shown off to them as if being hurt is *fun.*

Shen Yuan huffs.

"Mu-shishu says that collecting bruises is a Bai Zhan thing," he says.

Ning Yingying pauses; Shen Yuan can feel how Binghe turns his head just a bit, as if trying to glance down at him. But the other boy doesn't try to shrug him off, and Shen Yuan rather likes this shoulder. It's a good pillow, for belonging to a fourteen-soon-fifteen year old boy. No wonder all the wives liked to hang all over Luo Binghe.

"No, it's not," Ning Yingying says, brown eyes narrowing at him, "it shows that this one is strong and knows how to fight! A-Yuan is only saying that because he lost *again* yesterday."

"Bruises just show that someone hit you," he snaps back, "and if someone managed to hit you, then you're not strong, are you? It's why Shijie should let me *heal* her, instead of- of keeping them!"

Ning Yingying's cheeks puff up.

"Shizun returns soon, does he not?" Binghe cuts in before she can reply, hand catching Shen Yuan's, fingers interlacing, and Shen Yuan didn't realize how *tense* he was until Binghe squeezes his hand, that simple gesture making the tension bleed out of his shoulders, "this one doesn't think he would want to see Shijie injured. Perhaps Shijie could let Yuan heal her at least for his return?"

"Fiiiiine," Ning Yingying says and pulls her sleeves back down, "Dashixiong wants us to meet Shizun at Qiong Ding Peak, did A-Luo know that? It's-" she pauses. "This one can't

remember when it is?"

"Ten days," Shen Yuan says, the System ticking away when he glances at it, "would Shizun even want us to meet him there?"

Wouldn't *that* be nice? To just stay at Qing Jing Peak. Obviously the System won't let him, but… but it is *so* tempting.

"We should have a sleepover before Shizun returns."

Wait. What?

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both sit up straight.

"Sorry, what was that?" Shen Yuan says, and then sneezes when Ning Yingying flicks a leaf at his nose.

"We have to do it before, because Shizun would never let us have one," Ning Yingying explains, as if that was what needed explaining, "and it's not *fair* that A-Luo and A-Yuan get to have sleepovers *every day* when this one never gets to!"

"Shijie," Binghe says, looking pained, "a girl sleeping with two boys is not- it's not proper."

"So? This one shares a dorm with *many* boys."

"And *other girls,"* Shen Yuan points out, because while all the girls are old enough that they are about to get their own rooms, they aren't *yet,* and besides- "and a hallmaster to ensure everyone behaves! That is *not* the same as sharing a room, alone, with two boys!"

Binghe nods along.

"It's fine! You two can just share a bed," Ning Yingying says, waving off their concern about her reputation like it's an annoying bug and not, say, *important,* "and I'll take the free one!"

Shen Yuan does not look at Binghe. He doesn't want to see if the boy is blushing as much as he suddenly is. It's not, ah, common knowledge that they share- *shared*- a bed. Only Shen Qingqiu knew, really, because why else would there be two beds in the room? Of course everyone assumed they had been using *both.*

Sure, they're totally going to sleep in different ones now after- after *that.* Obviously. But that also means they *really* can't let Ning Yingying force them into the same bed again. What will they do then, huh??? If there's a repeat??? Ning Yingying is a future wife! What will she do, if Shen Yuan accidentally- when *she is in the room too–*

"I'll take Binghe's, I'm sure it smells nicer," Ning Yingying adds.

Shen Yuan's horror is abruptly replaced with offense.

“Excuse me? I do *not* smell,” he protests, “not that Binghe does either,” Shen Yuan hurries to add, because it would be mean to make her think that her future husband is *smelly,* when Binghe actually smells very nice, “but that’s just! Why does Shijie assume this one smells?”

“Because A-Luo is always clean and A-Yuan is always dirty,” she says, which is very rude, if, perhaps, true. So what if he is clumsy! Grass stains and ink and- and things- that’s not the same as being smelly! The way she says it, it’s like Shen Yuan hasn’t bathed for weeks.

“Shijie is worse,” he says at the same time as Binghe says,

“I think Yuan smells nice.”

“That doesn’t count,” Ning Yingying says.

“Why *not?”* Shen Yuan complains.

Ning Yingying sticks her tongue out at him in lieu of answering.
He, of course, does the same back at her. When he looks at Binghe, the boy is smiling, in that way he does when he doesn’t know if he’s supposed to laugh or not, dark eyes glittering.

At least he said Shen Yuan smells nice. Out of anyone in the whole world, Binghe would know! *And* he wouldn’t lie about it.

“We’re not having a sleepover,” Shen Yuan says, once he and Ning Yingying stop throwing leaves at each other.

“Yes we are,” Ning Yingying says.

“No,” Binghe says, and then Ming Fan catches them slacking off.

That same night, Ning Yingying falls through the bedroom window, much like how Binghe used to before Shen Qingqiu allowed him to stay. She falls loudly, all thumps and thuds and yelps of pain.

If not for the fact that he and Binghe had already been awake, sleep failing to come to them in their stupid, separate beds with too much space, she *definitely* would have woken them up.

“Why are you here!” Shen Yuan yells, and throws his pillow at her.

Ning Yingying only laughs and throws it back at him, and then squawks as Binghe throws his own pillow at the back of her head. What ensues is a pillow war, though an unfair one as they

only have two, and none of them are merciful enough to not attack whoever is pillow-less at the time. They end the night giggling, and for a moment, Shen Yuan forgets about the shadows and the System and everything that's not this moment; him and his two friends, breathless and happy.

Somehow, Binghe ends up sleeping on the floor.

Shen Yuan gives him his pillow to make up for it.

(Quest: Demonic Invasion of the Immortal's Mountain.
Time Remaining Until the Quest Begins: 2 hours!
We wish you good luck! (´∀`)ノ～ ♡)

The words hover before him, the System window mocking in its glossy blue shine against the gray sky above. It is cold, but there is no snow falling. Not yet; Shen Yuan feels distantly grateful for it. Sure, snow would be *very* cinematic, but he doesn't want to fight cold fingers *and* demons at the same time. That feels rude.

Fuck, did the original scene take place during the winter? He can't remember. He doesn't *think* it did, but whatever memories the System hasn't unlocked for him tend to be fuzzy around the edges at best, unreachable at worst. If only–

(Would User like to unlock Memory Fragments concerning the upcoming event? Cost: 100 B-points!)

Shen Yuan grimaces.

"I'm good," he says, and swipes the System out of sight. Binghe fidgets next to him and Ning Yingying peers around the older disciples in the front. Ming Fan ordered everyone younger than him to gather at the rainbow bridge before departure. It almost feels like a field trip.

A field trip of *doom.*

He looks down, eyes catching on Binghe's fingers as the other boy plays with Zheng Yang's sword tassel. It's not the fanciest thing, all red threads, the top shaped into an intricate knot. It's not as fancy as Ming Fan's jade, or the pieces of art that hangs from every Peak Lord's sword, but in Shen Yuan's defense, he tried his best to make it rather than buy it. Mostly because he wasn't allowed off the mountain.

Sure, the red stands out a bit against Qing Jing green, but Binghe likes it. And Shen Yuan likes the one Binghe made for *him,* of course. His own fingers drift towards it, spinning it. Fu

Yue's tassel is made up of gray and black threads, mingling together in such a way that it reminds him of a starry night sky. *How* Binghe manages that, he doesn't know. Maybe the white stone that the threads are wrapped around and through helps. Something his friend plucked out of the pond, polishing it until it was round and smooth like a pearl, before he wove the white and gray threads around it.

It looks *so* much better than what Shen Yuan made, but it's fine! This is just proof of their bond! Like friendship bracelets, except cultivator style. Even if they don't have fancy jade like *Ming Fan,* who probably was gifted his by his rich parents–

"This one told Shimei to be in the *back,"* Ming Fan scolds, and Shen Yuan blinks, looking towards Ning Yingying, but she hasn't even looked in that direction, unconcerned as she rambles excitedly at Binghe who looks less excited about welcoming Shen Qingqiu out of the caves, "Go stand by disciple Shen!"

"Yes, Dashixiong," is returned, and Shen Yuan freezes.

Chen Xiaoling bounces through the crowd of disciples, seeming even smaller than normal, ten years old and surrounded by tall teenagers, each carrying their own sword. More than one hand reaches out to pat her head, and each time sends her into pitter-patter giggles. Chen Xiaoling's brown hair is in pigtails, round face lighting up when she spots him, like an excited puppy.

"Shixiong!" she says and rushes forward, hugging him around the waist and Shen Yuan hugs her back out of reflex more than anything, dread twisting into slow horror.

Not because of her; Chen Xiaoling has always been very sweet, too little to be scary in any kind of way and always eager to please. Shen Yuan has grown used to her eagerly skipping to his side whenever she could, and he can't blame her for it. He *did* bring her to the peak. Raced Liu Mingyan and everything for her. She's *cute.* He enjoys her adorable little shenanigans, he likes how she admires Ning Yingying and gets shy around Binghe and he likes how she tries to sit next to them all at lunch, a little girl who wants the big kids to like her.

She's harmless and doesn't make his skin crawl like others.

It's just-

Shen Yuan's eyes slowly look towards the rainbow bridge. He follows the line of it, all the way to Qiong Ding Peak in the distance. The bridge shimmers beautifully, drifting in and out of sight as it winds its way through mist and mountain tops. It looks unreal and ethereal, and he knows the demons are going to break it when they attack. To trap them all; to make sure no help will arrive.

"Shimei," he says, mouth dry, forcing his gaze back down to meet her beaming smile, chubby cheeks and freckles, and she's so *tiny,* just a child, a little baby, the orange ribbons in her hair a clear sign that Ning Yingying helped her braid it, "this one didn't know Shimei was joining us as well."

“This one is happy to welcome Shizun back!” she says, and Shen Yuan feels Binghe press closer, shoulder to shoulder. He has done so a lot lately, instead of asking why Shen Yuan is so tired these days. He appreciates it more than ever now.

“It’s going to be a long walk,” Binghe gently teases, “will Shimei’s little legs keep up? Or does she think we shall fly, and we will carry her?”

Chen Xiaoling giggles and hides her face against Shen Yuan, peeking with shy excitement at Binghe. Unlike Ning Yingying, who wants to grow up fast and become independent faster, Chen Xiaoling so obviously thrives on the attention of being the youngest. Like him and Binghe, she must have lacked much of it before she joined the sect. He knows that she is from the village below, and he remembers how dirty she had been when they first met, nails caked with dirt.

Shen Yuan hugs her closer, feeling like his insides have turned to ice.

They’re bringing a ten year old to a demonic invasion.

Shen Yuan feels sick.

Chapter End Notes

NYY: A-Luo, I'm SO happy you're back! And that A-Luo is staying until Shizun returns!
LBH, practicing sword forms: did something happen?
NYY: there's been SO many boys acting all weird around A-Yuan!
LBH: *stumbles* huh?? ? HUH what?? I mean, wow, huh, why? Why are-why? Who? Zhu Kang? Is- is Zhu-shixiong one of them?
NYY: wow! How did A-Luo guess?
LBH: Lucky guess :)))

MQF: also if Shizhi does switch peaks, disciple Luo would be unable to follow.
SY: oh. Well, can't have that! Maybe this one will stay on Qing Jing Peak.
MQF, amused: indeed.

Me, reaching for the baseball bat: hey guys remember how E is for Violence?

Almost lost this chapter thanks to a fun glitch <3 haha!!!! Did not at all scare me :D NOPE
Anyway! Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. The air is all pollen, I am tired, and I am happy. Time to kick a few things into gear, yes? ;)

Fanart!!! :D
Anqelbean drew cute art of the Embarrassing Night Before (boners) <3

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

> Mind the tags! Warning for violence and mayhem and all that it may entail in this chapter ♡ ～('▽^人)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe has never visited Qiong Ding Peak before.

He has visited Wan Jian Peak, though only when he received Zheng Yang. After the mission in Chang Zhe city, he spent several nights at Qian Cao Peak, sleeping by Shen Yuan's side as the other boy healed.

His visits to other peaks were as brief as the one to Wan Jian, and far less impactful. The memories are fleeting things, the details smeared like wet ink on paper, remembered but not given importance. A sharp contrast to what Qing Jing Peak is in his mind; green walls of bamboo and grass that whispers in the wind, the swept courtyards and the cold ponds and the soft glow of the library. Of a house and a bedroom and cold feet against his. Qing Jing Peak is home, a comforting one that offers respite after every night hunt he is sent out on.

But Luo Binghe has never visited Qiong Ding.

It is not green like Qing Jing Peak and it does not have the waterfalls of Wan Jian, nor does it have the busy energy of An Ding and Qian Cao. They step onto it, and he takes note of the curving stairs that loop up and around in all directions, each step made of white stone that has been neatly stacked against the mountain. The buildings have sharp corners, dark roofs and an air of formal dignity that is unsettling to him, who more often feels like a child of poverty, playing pretend in a crowd of mythical cultivators.

The rainbow bridge connects to a plaza of gray and white stone tiles, a large circle cut in half by the sharp, sloping cliffs of the peak itself. They linger there for a moment as Ming Fan states their business to the master by the entrance.

Apparently they need directions to the Ling Xi caves.

"Where does the sect leader live?" Chen Xiaoling asks, stepping out so that she can see around the group of disciples.

"Ah, Shimei can't see it from here," Shen Yuan says, gently tugging her back into the fold, eyes flicking here and there, "it is behind that large building at the very top- can Shimei see it? That is where Shibo works, and his home is behind that one."

“It’s so big!”

Shen Yuan shushes her, though Ming Fan seems far more ready to ignore her loud voice than he was ever willing to ignore their whispers. Luo Binghe only spares the large building which Shen Yuan pointed to a brief glance- it *is* big, and high up enough that the clouds part as they drift through the top of the roof- before he watches his friend.

Ever since Luo Binghe returned from the last mission, Shen Yuan has been tired. His face has grown paler than what is reasonable even for the winter times, and he is inattentive in a way he has never been before. Not in the sense that he does not pay attention- rather, he pays *too much* of it, to too many things, spreading himself thin.

Luo Binghe wonders if it is because they sleep in separate beds now.

It is the one that makes most sense, he thinks. But it does not quite fit. Shen Yuan is tired, yes, but he is also *twitchy* in a way that Luo Binghe has not seen since Zhao De was still at the sect. But there is none who would dare touch Yuan now, not anymore. No one but–

Is Shen Yuan worried about Shen Qingqiu?

The group moves, directed to a nearby waiting area as they are not allowed to go directly towards the caves. There are plenty of stone benches to sit on, nestled in between decorative bamboo. They are just tall enough that Chen Xiaoling has to scramble to get up on one, her short legs dangling as she and Ning Yingying start speaking excitedly.

It would make sense if Shen Yuan is worried, Luo Binghe thinks as he moves to stand next to the other boy. It is slightly off to the side from everyone else, and it offers a good view of the rainbow bridge. They stand close enough that they can link their pinkies, and Shen Yuan offers him a small, tired smile for it. Even tired, he is lovely, Luo Binghe thinks as he smiles back, and then Shen Yuan returns to staring at the rainbow bridge, the worry settling back onto his face. He wishes that he had the privilege of reaching up to smooth out the furrow between his brows. Perhaps he can, and Yuan will think nothing of it.

When Shen Qingqiu returns, what will happen?

It is something Luo Binghe has thought about often. He is aware that Shen Yuan wants the man’s approval, despite the fact that the man deserves none himself. He is also aware that the man is fickle and unpredictable, in a way that reminds him of his mother’s failing health and the mocking laughter of rich children grinding congee into the street until it was nothing but a wet smear muddying the ground.

Who knows how Shen Qingqiu will act, exiting his year long seclusion. Will he be kinder? More cruel than before? Will he attempt to separate them even *more,* the way the missions have surely been intended to do?

Will he notice that Luo Binghe has used the kitchen, even though they tried to put everything back where it was before? Worse- will he notice how Luo Binghe’s eyes linger on–?

“Oh! Shen-shidi!” a voice shouts, and Luo Binghe blinks, their fingers sliding apart as Shen Yuan turns to look towards the new person. It is a disciple of Qiong Ding Peak, clad in black and white, hair up in a bun. A boy around their age, Luo Binghe notes.

“This one greets Shixiong,” Shen Yuan bows, nudging at Luo Binghe’s foot to do the same, “this one apologizes for not seeing Shixiong’s approach, and begs for forgiveness.”

“There is no need for such formality,” the boy replies, eyes sliding over Luo Binghe like he is not there, firmly settling on Shen Yuan. *Hm.* Luo Binghe narrows his eyes, taking in the eager smile, the way the newcomer’s eyes are warm as he stands half a step closer than needed, but not enough to be impolite. “Shen-shidi has visited Shizun’s home often enough that he may as well be part of our Peak! Perhaps one day he may even deign to stay longer?”

Before Luo Binghe can bristle at *that* idiotic idea, Chen Xiaoling’s gasp interrupts them from where she had been sneaking closer. She promptly abandons all stealth to hug Shen Yuan around the waist.

“Shixiong isn’t allowed to leave Qing Jing!” she protests, and Shen Yuan laughs nervously as he wraps one arm around her, “please don’t leave!”

“Tan-shixiong is only jesting, Shimei,” he assures her, “this one would never leave Qing Jing Peak.”

“Indeed,” Luo Binghe agrees, reaching out to give Shen Yuan’s hand a squeeze, smiling at him and seeing, from the corner of his eye, how *Tan-shixiong’s* eyes land on theirs with confusion, “Yuan-shixiong would never.”

“This one did not realize Shen-shidi was here with company,” the guy says, and offers a polite smile that does not reach his eyes, “what shall this Shixiong call Shidi?”

If the boy wants to appear clever, he should not have pretended to be too blind to notice the gathering of green and white, the matching robes between Luo Binghe and Yuan.

“This one is Luo Binghe,” he replies, and does not bother with bowing. He did that already, after all. Instead he offers a smile with teeth.

“Ah. Shen-shidi has spoken of Luo-shidi often,” Tan-shixiong says, his smile stiffer than before. *If he is to be of Qiong Ding Peak, known for diplomacy, then he should practice smiling better,* Luo Binghe thinks meanly even as he feels warm inside, knowing that Yuan has spoken of him to others. “It is a pleasure to meet Shidi.”

“Yuan-shixiong has not mentioned Tan-shixiong before,” Luo Binghe replies, which is true. “But it is an honor to meet Tan-shixiong as well,” *that* is a lie.

Shen Yuan clears his throat.

“There was never much cause to speak of Shixiong with Binghe,” he says as an explanation.

Luo Binghe knows he intends it as an apology, as something nice and harmless. But the words have Tan faltering, taking it for the rejection it is, though Yuan is too nice to ever think in such terms, “we are here to welcome Shizun back from his seclusion. Would Tan-shixiong wish to join us?”

The look on Tan’s face is barely passable politeness, his skin a shade paler at the thought of facing Shen Qingqiu.
It does not take long for the boy to excuse himself, scuttling away.

“I hope I didn’t offend him,” Shen Yuan mumbles, but it is a half-hearted thing. He gently nudges Chen Xiaoling back to the group, his own eyes still lingering on the rainbow bridge. Does he wish to return to Qing Jing?

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Luo Binghe says and gives his hand a squeeze, “and if not, it is not like Yuan will see him often.” The coward seemed scared of the mere mention of Shen Qingqiu, which in turn meant he wouldn’t visit their peak.

“Right. Right, because Shizun is returning,” Shen Yuan says, and the smile on his lips is a strained, fragile thing that Luo Binghe wants to press his thumb against, to gently wipe it away so it can be replaced with something that truly shows joy, “so I’ll be on Qing Jing more, and Binghe won’t be sent out as much.” A pause. “Hopefully.”

“Is something wrong?” he blurts out.

Shen Yuan startles; Luo Binghe holds back a wince.

He had not intended to ask so *bluntly.* Now Shen Yuan blinks at him, eyes rimmed with dark circles, head tilted down to meet his eyes, because somehow Shen Yuan is *still* taller than him. For a moment, Luo Binghe is distracted by that thought. Shen Qingqiu is a very tall man; will Yuan take after him? Luo Binghe is around Ning Yingying’s height now- will he always be shorter than Shen Yuan?

Not that he would mind. He rather likes it, having to tilt his head back just a little, to make an effort to meet his best friend’s eyes. It means that it is always intended, a gesture they think to make rather than an accident.

“No,” Shen Yuan denies, voice cracking on it, cheeks instantly pink like plum blossoms. The blush only grows deeper when Luo Binghe raises an unimpressed eyebrow, pointedly giving Shen Yuan’s hand another squeeze.

The other boy releases an explosive sigh, green eyes darting towards the cliff edge.

“Nothing is *wrong,”* he insists, but there is that odd little downward tilt to one side of his mouth, the one that means he’s lying. It’s one that Luo Binghe hasn’t seen in *years.* Not since Yuan pretended he wasn’t being bullied, all because he didn’t want to cause a fuss.

Well, Luo Binghe has already promised to hold the grudges that Shen Yuan can’t. Should he then not also cause a fuss when his friend is too nervous to do so? Worry is just another part

of loving someone, isn't it?

"But Yuan hasn't been sleeping well," Luo Binghe points out.

"Neither has Binghe," his friend shoots back, "that does not mean there is something wrong! Though… though, hypothetically…"

"Hypothetically…?"

"What if- say- what if maybe this one, ah, had- had a, uh, maybe a nightmare about…"

"Luo-shidi!" a girl calls out, causing them both to jump, snatching their hands away from each other.

"Meng-shijie," Luo Binghe greets, remembering the older girl from a nighthunt months ago. She has black hair and brown eyes, and her otherwise pale skin always seems to be bright red whenever he looks at her. And next to her was-

"Ah, this one greets Liu-shijie," Shen Yuan says, and Luo Binghe remembers him mentioning her before; had he not managed to snatch Chen Xiaoling from Xian Shu Peak, at the selection? He had said that she was the head disciple of it, and related to Liu Qingge, and apparently he had been told she was so beautiful she had to hide her face, *and* that she was skilled with the sword. As long as she does not attempt to grab and kick them like her brother, Binghe does not care.

Briefly, their eyes meet. Liu Mingyan offers a nod, before the other girl pushes forward to talk with Luo Binghe.

He bites back a sigh.

Hopefully he can coax Shen Yuan into telling him later.

(Quest: Demonic Invasion of the Immortal's Mountain.
Time Remaining Until the Quest Begins: 20 minutes!)

The words hover over Liu Mingyan's head, a fun little reminder that she plays a big part in the upcoming scene. Her veil flutters slightly in the wind, and her dark eyes flick between Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan isn't surprised that she has yet to greet Binghe; of what he can remember from *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* she was a quiet and solemn person, staying in her lane unless

dealing out some well-deserved justice. It was part of why she had been his favorite wife back then- unlike *most* of that massive harem, she was actually useful!

Should he introduce them? In the original, they didn't really talk until after Binghe ended up at Hua Huan Palace, and then it was to figure out how to make Shen Qingqiu pay for his crimes. Like, well. Like the crime of murdering Liu Qingge. Except Shang Qinghua had implied…

Shen Yuan clears his throat.

"May this one ask Shijie why she is here?" he wonders, shoving those thoughts away.

"This one is here to inquire of her brother," Liu Mingyan replies, "to see if he has left the caves yet. It appears not- and so, we were returning to Xian Shu Peak." The words are said evenly, but it somehow reminds him of Duán Chen, though he can't say why. Exasperation, perhaps? Like when Duán Chen would pointedly refold clothes where Shen Yuan could see, as if to show him how to do it without openly instructing him, except now it is clearly aimed at the War God himself.

What a weird reminder. Why would he think of Duán Chen *now?*

Liu Mingyan's dark eyes briefly look over him, before they sweep towards the group of Qing Jing disciples. For a moment, her eyes linger on where Chen Xiaoling giggles as she is tickled by Ning Yingying.

He wonders if she is taking in how happy Chen Xiaoling is; would she report that to Qi Qingqi? The woman had been *so* mad about them taking the girl, after all. Not that Shen Yuan regrets it! Much! Except for now, specifically. If she wasn't part of Qing Jing Peak, then maybe she wouldn't have to risk a whole damn demon invasion.

His eyes darts back towards the rainbow bridge. It still shimmers in the cold sunlight, whole and perfectly maintained. He looks towards Binghe, who still has no idea about the danger. Though his smile is very much stuck on the 'be polite' version. He's even leaning a little bit *away* from- who was it? Ming-shijie? No, *Meng.* Like Meng Mo???

Oh fuck, *Meng Mo.*

"Is Shen-shidi here for a similar reason?" Liu Mingyan politely asks, and Shen Yuan snaps his eyes back to her, and forcibly relaxes his clenched fists, palms itching from where his nails dug in.

"Ah, yes. We have been told that Shizun is returning today. Dashixiong wished for us to greet him upon exit," Shen Yuan says, "perhaps- perhaps Shijie would like to remain, to inquire about her brother from Shizun?"

Please say yes, he thinks, *or Ning Yingying will volunteer and she will fucking die!!!*

"That sounds like a good idea," Liu Mingyan says with a nod, "Meng-shimei, let us take a

seat as we wait. And-" she glances downwards, her eyes curving with a hidden smile, "hello, Xiao-shimei," she says, voice softer than before.

Chen Xiaoling blushes a bright red and hides her face against Shen Yuan's side. It's not the first time he wonders how old she *actually* is- she claimed to be ten, but it was the minimum age requirement and, well. She is *so* tiny. And cute. Normally he wants to coo over her, but today the reminder only brings dread.

He lets her hide against him.

"Does Lingling remember Shijie?" he asks with forced cheer, "she was at the selection."

"Mhm," Chen Xiaoling nods, daring to peek at Liu Mingyan. Meng-shijie also moves closer, and Shen Yuan is too distracted to be properly amused as Binghe eagerly steps back into line, almost *also* hiding behind Shen Yuan. Isn't the boy meant to be good with girls? Though then again, the whole charming stallion thing only truly began *in* the Abyss. Maybe he's shy. Maybe Meng-shijie, who was never mentioned in the original, just doesn't count. She certainly seems annoying enough- still standing a bit too close to be polite, he notes, and resists the urge to move to hide Binghe away, much like he's resisting the urge to grab everyone and run back to Qing Jing Peak.

Meng Mo, the Abyss, Shang Qinghua and Mobei-Jun…

There is so much to worry about. Fuck.

"Does Xiao-shimei enjoy Qing Jing Peak?" Liu Mingyan asks.

"Yes," the girl replies, "this one likes it very much."

(Mission starts in 10…)

Wait.

Wait, what?

(9… 8…)

No, it can't have been twenty minutes already!? Shen Yuan's eyes immediately go towards the cliff edge. They are too close, aren't they? Should they leave? But they were told to wait. They were- fuck, is there somewhere one can hide little kids?

(5… 4…)

He hugs Chen Xiaoling closer to himself with one arm and grabs Binghe's hand with the other.

"Did Shijie also receive a sword?" he asks, mind racing even as he begins to half-drag, half lead Chen Xiaoling and Binghe back towards the group.

(3… 2…)

“Yes,” Liu Mingyan replies, following, her eyes intent as she watches their hands, “it is called Shui Se.”

“Yuan,” Binghe says in a low voice, “are you alright?”

“Of course, just–”

(Zero!)

Shen Yuan looks behind just in time to see the rainbow bridge shatter.

It’s beautiful and horribly, terribly loud. It is so loud that he can’t even hear Chen Xiaoling’s shriek of fear, only feel it as she clings to him. The shattering is like lightning striking glass; uncountable pieces exploding into blinding fireworks, and even as it all falls down below and out of sight, leaving nothing but beautiful pillars behind, Shen Yuan’s eyes sting from the light of the spectacle, as if he stared too long at the sun.

All of Qiong Ding falls silent.

And then, in the distance, there are screams.

Shen Yuan stares in that direction; far off, there is a rising column of smoke, thick like thunderclouds reaching for the sky. He knows where that is. He went with Yue Qingyuan once. It’s at the back of the peak, where all the dorms are. The living quarters.

It’s where the *children are.*

All around, everyone starts rushing about. He is distantly aware of masters rising on their swords to fly there, of disciples scattering. There is a ringing sound in his ears, accompanied by the loud sound of the peak’s alarm, a gong being hit over and over again. There is nothing but cold, cold dread sinking into his heart as he stares at the column of smoke, watching it become two and then three and four–

“Yuan!”

Shen Yuan snaps back to reality.

He looks down and sees that Binghe’s hand is bloodied from where Shen Yuan’s nails dug into his palm. He yanks his hand away, but Binghe only grabs it again, uncaring of the pain as he tugs them both in the direction of Ming Fan and the others, Liu Mingyan and her friend following.

“Binghe-”

“It’s fine,” his friend cuts him off, but he’s as pale as poor little Chen Xiaoling, who is still

clinging to Shen Yuan, and Binghe's other hand is on the hilt of Zheng Yang.

Thank *fuck* they were allowed to bring their swords.

The moment they are close enough, Ming Fan swoops in, and the rest of Qing Jing's disciples do the same, surrounding them and, most importantly, Chen Xiaoling. Liu Mingyan and Meng-shijie linger by the edges, Liu Mingyan's eyes cool as she sweeps them across the plaza. It's impressive that she can look so calm even as the screams begin to spread out all around them. Shen Yuan, past the horror clawing at his throat, feels envious.

"What is going on!?" Ming Fan demands, but of course there are no answers, the guards by the entrance to the peak still recovering from the loud and bright destruction that they stood so close to, unable to leave their posts as they continue to clutch at their heads.

"Should we leave?" Ning Yingying asks, a tremble in her voice.

As if on cue, a young man clad in An Ding's colors flies past them in a blurr, only to collide with a wall of invisible force. It flashes a bright red upon the impact, spreading out like ripples in a pond, symbols in demonic hanzi glowing before it fades back to invisibility. The man falls to the ground with a *crack,* his head bouncing in a sickening way, neck broken and eyes blank, and Meng-shijie shrieks and jumps away from him.

Shen Yuan holds Chen Xiaoling closer, hoping she didn't see.

The appearance of the barrier answers questions none had yet asked. This isn't just an accident, some strange coincidence of unfortunate events. The barrier tells them exactly what they need to know, what Shen Yuan already knew. Cang Qiong Mountain is under attack, and they are all trapped.

Terrified, grim silence falls over the group. Even Liu Mingyan's stoic facade seems shaken. But she takes a deep breath and straightens her posture, dark eyes narrowing into a determined glare. *Best wife,* Shen Yuan thinks, feeling a touch too hysterical.

"The caves," Liu Mingyan says, "there are two Peak Lords within the caves, are there not? Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu and my brother."

"But we can't enter them," Ming Fan snaps back, voice strained, eyes wild, one hand hovering over the hilt of his own sword, "there are arrays to hinder those who haven't received permission!"

"Can't we still go there?" Binghe asks, "is it not better than being out *here?"* Here, in the open. Here, close to where the bridge broke, close to the cliff edges. There are masters shouting orders, but they are few. They will not be enough to defend.

After all, most of them are away. Shen Yuan remembers Yue Qingyuan telling him how he had to leave for a few days. He remembers the man mentioning how many masters had been sent off on diplomatic missions, all in preparation for the future conference, to settle disputes and finish sealing agreements. He remembers seeing that *fucking* System window hovering in

the corner, mocking him as it counted down the days and- and- and why was the *one* person who would have maybe wanted to welcome Shen Qingqiu back, the *one person,* why was it that Yue Qingyuan of all people had to leave the sect right now?

It's not like Shen Yuan could have asked anyone *else* if they wanted to welcome the fucking asshole back. And now…

"It's better than staying here," he hears someone say, and he's- it's hard to breathe, but he has to. Chen Xiaoling is here, and so is Ning Yingying and Binghe. And they *should* be fine, being the protagonist and the future wife, but- but what if not?

He just has to… breathe. The way he did with Lady Jia. Breathe. Tuck it all away, and *focus on the task.* Where will the demons begin to arrive? Where can they find cover? Binghe has to be a part of it, probably, but where can they *survive?* Should they split up?

"Look!" Ning Yingying shouts, and they all turn in time to see demons crawling onto the plaza, their grins wide and eyes filled with glee. There are so *many,* he thinks, watching as they quickly grow in numbers, five becoming ten and twenty and soon there's a hundred, maybe more–

Their weapons are clashing against the swords of the cultivators who rush forward to stop them in their tracks. But most of the capable ones have already left for the fires in the back. Here, at the plaza, remains the untested and young, the old and frail, those who stayed to try and send out warnings to the rest of the sect. Unless those tending to the fires return in time…

There are talismans in his pockets. Should he throw them out now? No, too far away, and they can only blind and sting, nothing like the explosions and fires he knows the older disciples can make. If they are to be useful, the demons must get closer, which he does *not want, thanks.*

"Back up," Liu Mingyan orders, and they all do, hurrying away from the edge, towards the direction of the Ling Xi caves. Except as they turn to do so, more demons appear from between buildings, down the stairs, herding stragglers towards the plaza and *fucking hell,* how many fucking guys did Sha Hualing *bring???* Was it like this in the original? Fuck!

"Swords!" Ming Fan snaps, voice shrill and far less impressive than Liu Mingyan's, and yet they all obey. Shen Yuan has to let go of Chen Xiaoling to move to the outer side of the circle they form around her.

Fu Yue sings in his hand as he draws it, the usually smooth, soothing tune of it now cold and sharp. And yet, even now, it's comforting. A tether to keep calm, and Shen Yuan breathes in and out as he readies himself. The black hilt is cold against his palms, and he hopes Fu Yue doesn't mind the blood he is smearing onto it from where he held Binghe's hand.

Slowly but surely they are all pressed closer together, a great crowd of cultivators. There are those whose swords are already stained with blood and ichor, some whose robes have been splattered with gore. Others are injured; limping or being held up by their sect siblings.

And of course Shen Yuan ends up on the outside of the fucking crowd, despite Ming Fan's best attempt to yank him back from it. It's useless, though. Because all of Qing Jing Peak ends up in the same place, their green a sharp contrast to the black and gray robes all around. Because of course they are!

"Ohohoho," a voice laughs, bringing to mind old anime villains. His grip tightens around Fu Yue, and he feels how Binghe presses closer on one side, Ning Yingying on the other.

The sea of demons part, and Sha Hualing walks forward.

She is unnaturally pale; like someone painted her skin in pure white, reminding him of porcelain dolls. Except her grin is sharp, her gleeful eyes lined with bright red to match the demonic mark on her brow. Every step she takes jingles merrily, the silver bangles on her wrists and ankles decorated with bells. The sound alone is jarring enough that Shen Yuan almost misses the fact that she is *practically naked.*

Is that literally just veils? Lots and lots of red, gauzy veils, wrapped around in layers upon layers that *still* let them catch glimpses of skin? Holy shit. And she's barefoot? How are her feet not dirty???

It's probably the wrong thing to focus on, he knows. Sha Hualing was not only one of Luo Binghe's most troublesome wives, but also one of the strongest. She is a *threat,* even now, young as she is.

Just one with questionable fashion choices.

"Is this all the great Cang Qiong Mountain Sect has to offer?" she mocks, even holding her hand up to her face like a classic anime villainess, "how funny! It will be such a pleasure to slay you all! A fitting tribute for the Saintess of the Demon Clan!"

Cultivators raise their voices in outrage all around, as if she is lying about her ability to slaughter them. As if they have not all been penned in like pigs for slaughter. Even now, she only looks delighted, her bright eyes roaming across them, looking for a victim to toy with.

(Quest Objective: Survive!)

"Fuck off!" he snaps, and a demon steps closer. Which- wait-

"A feisty one," the demon says, and Shen Yuan pales. It looks like a large, hulking lizard, gender impossible to tell. Teeths upon teeths in a long maw, its breath smelling of rotten flesh and sulfur and heat.

Did it fucking *hear him?*

No one has ever heard him before, when he spoke to the System. It has *never* happened. But the demon is grinning down at him, claws dripping with blood, and then it sniffs the air. Slowly, it looks past him.

Right at Chen Xiaoling.

“A morsel,” the lizard demon rumbles, reaching *over–*

Zheng Yang flashes golden bright, and the demon’s hand falls to the plaza’s floor in a thud, blood splattering like a fountain as it shrieks and jumps away. Shen Yuan sees how steam rises from what has fallen, the cold winter air meeting boiling hot blood.

“Is someone trying to fight back~?” Sha Hualing asks gleefully, her bells chiming as she prances over, shoving the demon to the side, harsh enough to make it stumble. It’s a comical and terrifying sight all at once- the lizard demon is twice her size, and yet it seemed to weigh *nothing* to her. She walks until she is just out of stabbing distance, eagerly looking them all over.

This close, she’s shorter than Shen Yuan and he can see the sharp tip of her ears peeking past her black braids. This close, he refuses to look anywhere below her neck. It is easy to do so; her bright makeup and the glimpse of fangs as she greedily stares at Binghe’s bloodied sword is distracting enough.

This close, he’s far too aware of Chen Xiaoling clinging to the back of his robes, tiny body trembling.

“Was it you?” Sha Hualing asks, and then giggles and leans back as Binghe tries to stab at her again, narrowly missing her, “it was! Hey, you! Lizard!” she then yells, and the lizard demon slinks closer once more, baring its too-many teeth at Binghe as it does before it focuses back on the demoness, “you let a little boy cut your arm off! That’s *pathetic!”*

“I wanted a snack,” the demon defends itself.

“He’s too big for you! He’s little but not *that* little!” Sha Hualing laughs, as if she and Binghe aren’t the same fucking height, the same *age.*

“No, there’s a tinier one there too! A morsel!” the demon protests, and Shen Yuan’s hands are *burning,* his insides twisting with horror as far too many demonic eyes land on their group.

In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* children were considered *delicious.* Almost as much as rotting human meat, or virginal maidens.

“And you were going to grab it for yourself? Without *asking?”* Sha Hualing says, and then she grabs the lizard by its bottom jaw and tears it right off. A quick and easy gesture, like someone ripping apart a wet paper mache. She throws it to the ground before them, the gore splattering onto their boots.

The demon gurgles and clutches at its mouth; as if it can do anything about it, its tongue hanging outside its body. Shen Yuan can see bone. Can see how it swallows, the muscles within moving, blood flowing like a river down its front before it crumbles, clawing at the stone tiles until it grows still, the eyes as blank as the man from before.

Holy shit.

That did *not* happen in the original, he's *sure* of it.

"I'm the one who decides!" Sha Hualing yells, flicking her clawed hand to get rid of the blood in such a casual manner one could hardly relate it to a fucking *murder,* "no one eats anything without the Demonic Saintess' permission!"

The demons roar in agreement, and Shen Yuan stares wide-eyed at the very, *very* dead demon before him.

"Now," Sha Hualing says, holding out her hand in such a way that all he can think of is a spoiled girl asking for her father's wallet, "show the morsel to this one, so that one shall decide who to feed it to!"

Shen Yuan backs up, pushing Chen Xiaoling further back, as much as he can in this crowd. Sha Hualing's eyes snap away from Binghe's sword, instead landing on him. He freezes.

'System,' he thinks, not daring to risk speaking out loud again, ' *is there not an easy mode for this? Show me the options!'*

(Easy Mode is unavailable for Main Quests! Would User like to purchase a hint on how to achieve the mission objective?)

What, the objective that's *Survive?* Yes! Yes, of fucking course!

(One Hint costs 20 B-points, would User like to purchase?)

YES.

(Self-Defense is Encouraged! User has Many Tools at their disposal, please select between the following!

1) Induce Adrenaline!
2) Fu Yue Epic AOE!
3) Magical Girl Power Kaboom!
4) Tearful Sheltering!
5) Her, Not Me!

ヾ(*´∇`)ﾉ)

He wants to spit blood. What the *fuck* are these names? And none of them sound any good! There isn't even any additional info, the names are questionable at best and gives little to no hints and–

"Pretty boy," Sha Hualing says, her clawed hand suddenly right in his face, the sharp nails

painted a bright red to match the rest of her, too close, nearly touching him and then she *is* touching him, one finger tugging at a lock of hair, “are you hiding something from this esteemed one? Is the little morsel behind you?”

He bluescreens.

Shen Yuan thrusts out one hand and feels white-hot heat in his palm. A sound like rushing wind is the only warning before bright, burning light explodes outwards. Sha Hualing dodges with a surprised shriek, and Shen Yuan has only a second to meet her eyes, wide with disbelief and insulted fury, before the stunned silence breaks when all the demons charge forward.

The world erupts into chaos.

What had been a standoff quickly becomes a bloodied frenzy. Shrieks and screams all around, swords flashing and claws scratching. Those of Qing Jing struggle to stay together, every flash of green a welcomed glimpse even as they dodge incoming attacks, everyone spreading out across the large plaza to move more easily. Shen Yuan sees Ming Fan slash at a demon grabbing at Chen Xiaoling; he sees Binghe stab one that reaches for himself, and he sees Heng He’s arm get clawed, blood dripping, and he sees Ning Yingying wielding her Mo Liqin, going for Sha Hualing who is twirling like a murderous acrobat through the chaos, slashing with her knives and claws as she goes.

And Shen Yuan remembers how Sha Hualing was one of the strongest wives, always a step below Liu Mingyan, and he stumbles upon the body of the lizard demon and the man from An Ding and there are limbs and blood fucking *everywhere* and Sha Hualing dives towards Ning Yingying who isn’t backing down because *of course she isn’t,* and–

“Yuan!” Binghe screams as Shen Yuan throws himself forward, Fu Yue glinting as he stabs towards the demoness–

Ning Yingying gets kicked in the gut so hard she falls to the ground and Shen Yuan’s wrist gets caught, Sha Hualing’s claws digging into his skin as she grins like a fox.

“Gotcha!” she giggles, before the sly grin turns vicious.

A twist and something *pops;* his wrist feels too warm and he jerks free, or tries to as Fu Yue clatters to the ground, because Sha Hualing won’t let go and he looks at his wrist and for a moment he doesn’t get it. He sees white and red, a sharp jutting upward of something jagged, and–

And that’s bone.

That’s *bone,* he thinks, struck mute as he gets yanked closer, the pain distant and throbbing, adrenaline rushing through his veins and he can hear Binghe trying to fight through the crowd of demons, a distant kind of sound, but Sha Hualing is reaching for his *other* hand, and right. Right, she was always a petty one, and he did almost qi blast her face off, so *of course* she wants to break both his wrists. Of course!

Shen Yuan stomps down on a bare foot, and Sha Hualing shrieks but she doesn't let him go, his skin crawls with it, and fuck! *Fuck, fuck, fuck–!*

"Shizun!" Ming Fan yells, voice cutting through the chaos and the relief in his voice and what it *means* sinks into Shen Yuan's bones as he jerks his head towards the sound.

Shen Qingqiu arrives like a whirlwind of green robes, a sword glare white as snow and more cutting than a blizzard killing four demons in one before he has even landed. All around, the demons immediately back up, cultivators eagerly swarming towards the Peak Lord that has finally arrived.

For but a brief moment, green meets green, and Shen Yuan feels the weirdest urge to cry.

And then he gets yanked back, and he bites back a scream of pain as the grip on his broken wrist tightens before both his hands are trapped behind his back. In the next moment, the cold steel of Sha Hualing's knife pressed against his throat.

Perhaps it's the pain or maybe it's the fact that he's being held against the chest of a half-naked demon girl, but it takes a while before Shen Yuan realizes what happened.

"Stay back!" Sha Hualing orders, "this Ling-er has heard *much* of the Xiu Ya sword, and would not wish to cause any offense!"

"Then let go of Shidi!" Ming Fan yells back, only to fall quiet as Shen Qingqiu takes one step forward. Binghe lurches forward as well, but the man simply grabs him like one would scruff a puppy and throws him back into the crowd behind him, not sparing a single glance. Heng He has to hold Binghe back from trying again.

"The cowardice of demons are of no surprise," Shen Qingqiu says, "so willing to prey on the weak, once they know they overstepped their own capabilities." Derision drips from each word. The knife presses down, and Shen Yuan grimaces at the sting that follows.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes land on where blood beads from Shen Yuan's throat. He grows very still.

"My people didn't climb this mountain for the sake of battle," Sha Hualing says, like a liar who fucking lies, "It's just that we've long heard of how Cang Qiong Mountain is the home of talented individuals! We only wished to ascend the mountain for a look, to spar and learn from you."

"And yet you hold a disciple hostage."

Shen Qingqiu still hasn't sheathed his blade. The once pristine plaza is covered in gore, and yet Xiu Ya remains as pure as the snow its glare resembles. He truly does look like an Immortal, pristine and deadly among the macabre scene that Qiong Ding Peak has become.

"Ling-er is young and unable to manage her subordinates," Sha Hualing sweetly replies, "things simply got out of hand! Ling-er only wishes to ensure that Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu

does not do anything rash. The family resemblance is *very* telling!”

Wow.

He’s being held hostage, all because they share a face.

Shen Yuan hates everything.

Chapter End Notes

SHL: YOU ARE OBVIOUSLY RELATED
All of CQM: omg you're not supposed to say it OUT LOUD, it's meant to be a RUMOR
SQQ: *vibrating with the urge to kill*
SY: does he want to kill the demons or ME???

Gosh!!! This was one of those chapters I had a great time writing, but also one I had to force myself to not over-edit! Also the current weather is, as one might say, nerfing me. Goodness me my fingers! I did not ask to be a human barometer! And it appears that the weather will keep being like this for a bit, so if the next chapter ends up late, blame the air pressure.

Thank you as always for reading <3

Oooh fanart~! (⌒ᗜ⌒)

Friendodo drew this sketch of Lin Jie lesson time <3

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It has been a year of no sunlight; only the glow of night pearls and flickering candles has accompanied him within the cave.

The air is cold. The sun is warm.

The child has grown taller.

It is a stray thought that has no place in Shen Qingqiu's mind, a pointless thing to notice. It does not matter if the child has grown taller; what matters is that he remains *weak.* Weak enough to be exploited, a useful blade for the enemy to wield.

The child is pale, his breath visible in the cold winter air. The knife against his throat glints in the sun.

Shen Qingqiu tightens his grip on Xiu Ya.

"And what," he finally says, words slow, eyes unblinking as he continues to stare the demoness down, "does the demon propose then, in place of this master doing something *rash?"*

"Why don't we each choose three representatives and hold three matches?" the demoness suggests, her voice pitched in a childlike way, a poor attempt at being endearing, clashing horribly with her shameless display of skin, "this Ling-er only wants to learn! Afterwards, we shall all leave, no matter whose side wins or loses."

His lip curls.

"You wish to challenge children?" he asks, for that is what he is surrounded by. Children and elders, those too weak to slow their aging or too young to be much help. There are some select few who may be *capable*- he saw the brute's sister in the crowd, and he is aware of Qi Qingqi's high standards- but many are injured.

It is an unfair suggestion, but one made with a hostage. If he does not agree to the ridiculous terms and is repaid with blood, his honor as a righteous cultivator will be called into question. It will be found lacking and Shen Yuan will be dead.

"No killing, of course," the so-called *Ling-er* assures him, no doubt lying as demons do, "this is merely a learning opportunity, Master Shen!"

Shen Qingqiu briefly meets the child's eyes. They are wide, the green of them appearing darker against deathly pale skin. The white clouds that shape his breath come out too fast, a

sign of panic. His hands are trapped behind him, too close to the demoness to safely detonate a qi blast.

If not for him, Shen Qingqiu could cut her head off without taking a single step.

“Fine,” he says, “three matches, none shall be lethal.”

The demoness smiles like a fox; eyes curving into slits as she shows off all of her teeth and how sharp they are. She likely would need neither knives nor claws to rip the boy’s throat out. She could simply bite down and tear like the beastly creature she is. And yet the child always insists that demons can be *civilized.*

If the brat survives this, perhaps he will finally know better.

“Ling-er thanks Master Shen,” she demurs.

Before Shen Qingqiu can reply, Luo Binghe throws himself forward, robes splattered with gore and hair barely still in braids, and yet his dark eyes are fierce, the stubborn tilt to his chin a sign of trouble before he even opens his mouth.

“Then this one volunteers!” Luo Binghe loudly proclaims before Shen Qingqiu can stop him, and for a moment, he has half a mind letting the brat do exactly that. Whether the fool wants to kill himself or not is of no concern to Shen Qingqiu.

But across the plaza, Shen Yuan’s eyes grow impossibly wide. There is the risk of qi deviation, if things are allowed to progress. The boy may very well blow his own hands off if he qi deviates from his current position; if he does not die immediately from the lash back.

“No,” Shen Qingqiu says, scruffing the beast once more, sneering when the brat struggles against it, nearly choking himself like the little idiot he is, “disciple Luo is too inexperienced for this *honorable* task, and will stay behind this master.”

“Actually,” the demoness says, “this Ling-er would be *happy* to accept. After all, she must avenge her subordinate!”

Shen Qingqiu raises a brow and flicks his gaze to the grisly scene all around them, to the dead and dying, to the demons left on the floor as they slowly lose grasp of what little life that remains. Amongst demons, there is no sympathy for the weak.

“That boy cut off the arm of this one’s subordinate *before* all that,” the demoness defends herself, batting her eyes, “this Ling-er simply must pay it back when her subordinate can’t!”

“The one you *killed?”* Shen Yuan blurts out, and winces as the blade is pressed against his throat once more, a warning that he previously ignored like the *impulsive idiot he is.* More blood drips from his neck, the demoness cooing and pressing her cheek against his shoulder. It makes the boy breathe quicker.

Shen Qingqiu lets go of the brat.

Luo Binghe stumbles forward at the suddenness of it, but quickly steadies himself. He has grown, much like Shen Yuan, though the difference in height is easy to spot even with the distance between them. When he unsheathes his sword, the little beast holds it properly, his stance perfect. One could almost be fooled to think he stands a chance.

It does not matter.

"This master questions how a demon intends to… *avenge* a subordinate without lethal consequences," Shen Qingqiu says, as though the demon won't break her word and immediately kill the boy before him.

"An arm for an arm is fair, is it not?" the demoness suggests gleefully, and only laughs when the cultivators all voice their disapproval. Of course, none step forward to take Luo Binghe's place; that would be the honorable thing to do, in a crowd where only Chen Xiaoling is younger than the little beast. But honor is a thing easily discarded when one's own limbs are on the line.

Shen Qingqiu is not surprised at the lack of volunteers.

"Shizun," Ming Fan says in a strangled whisper, "surely sending Luo-shidi will only dishonor-"

Ming Fan's sentence is cut short when the demoness shoves Shen Yuan away from herself, instead into the arms of one of the hulking demons by her side. This one is covered in spiky armor, the sharp points gleaming faintly in the sunlight with something viscous. Poison, then. Shen Yuan must know it too, with how carefully he holds himself, eyes torn between staring at the armored arm around him and the sight of his little friend walking to his death.

If the demon tenses, those spikes will pierce the child's skin. A quick glance reveals no cultivators of Qian Cao Peak amongst the crowd. Shen Qingqiu forcibly loosens his grasp on Xiu Ya's hilt.

Xiu Ya's blade had begun to glow; now it dulls, as Shen Qingqiu settles back and lets Luo Binghe step forward into the space created between the two factions, the demoness walking with exaggerated hip movements that makes the bells chime with each step. She avoids stepping in the puddles of blood and only spares a brief moment to kick a limb out of the way, the wet sound of flesh against stone as it lands near Shen Qingqiu's feet.

It is human.

Beside him, Liu Mingyan draws a sharp breath. The girl is clutching at her own sword, and there is a moment, however brief, where he considers–

It is too late, of course. The little beast has already volunteered, and Shen Qingqiu knows nothing of the brat's skills, and so he cannot be certain if the boy has surpassed the brute's little sister or not. Though Ming Fan is correct in that Luo Binghe's defeat will only stain the reputation of Qing Jing Peak, and that defeat is the most likely option. A defeat which will

send Shen Yuan into a qi deviation, no doubt. He must use this time to consider other options.

Troublesome idiots.

He ignores them as the demoness begins to gloat and mock, baiting Luo Binghe into stabbing at her. Instead, Shen Qingqiu shifts so that Ning Yingying is right behind him.

He presses a jade token into her hands, and the girl spares only a moment of hesitation before she leaves.

Good.

It is best that she does not see the mess this will become.

Wrong order, Shen Yuan thinks, feeling cold and shivery and *weak,* but most of all, kind of offended. Binghe is not meant to go first- Shen Qingqiu is supposed to fight the one armed demon, and then Liu Mingyan should fight Sha Hualing and *then* Binghe fights the poison guy! That's the correct order, the right thing, the proper build-up! The protagonist goes last for maximum impact!

Instead he watches with horror as Sha Hualing avoids a strike, laughing as she lets her knife slice against Binghe's arm, red blooming through his white sleeves. It's not even a deep cut, but the sight of blood still makes it hard to breathe.

She's playing with her food.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, wanting to say something, anything, but the large demon holding him shifts, a casual movement that reminds him once more of just *who* is holding him. He can see the spikes and how they glint in the daylight. If he moves, it's all over.

Without a Cure is *such* bullshit.

He's going to yell so much at Airplane once the guy returns.

The thought is delirious; the pain is getting to him, he thinks. Even breathing sends cold, shivery pain from his wrist. A broken bone, piercing through skin, and how long will that take to heal? It's been months since he got better from his leg but it took forever to heal before that, so how long will *this–?*

Shen Yuan feels like he is going to throw up. If he does, the demon- Sky? Sky-Something.

Sky-poison-demon -*bitch* or whatever, it doesn't matter. What matters is that if he throws up on the demon's too big arm, Shen Yuan's head will most definitely be smashed like a watermelon.

So he can't throw up.

It's just that the adrenaline has left the building, and it's a struggle to even stand. But he has to stand. He has to *think,* because there was a plan. Right? He thinks he had a plan. Shen Qingqiu is there, glaring. Liu Mingyan is there. Somewhere, in the crowd of cultivators, there is Ning Yingying and Chen Xiaoling. Shen Qingqiu will keep *those* two safe, at least. They won't be sacrificed as demon bait.

Though Binghe wasn't sacrificed this time, was he? He volunteered.

The protagonist won't die.

It's a thought that's hard to believe. They all watch as Binghe bleeds more and more; a slice there, a kick here. It's not that the boy is bad- even Shen Yuan can see that his form is good, though raw around the edges. The problem, he thinks, is that Binghe is used to wild beasts or friendly spars.

Sha Hualing fights like neither.

She slinks around him like a serpent, all fluid movements with sharp stings left behind as she cuts him up. Once, the girl leaps up, legs around Binghe's neck, trying to yank him down to the ground with the sudden movement. In a different time, that would have earned horny comments from all readers. Binghe only manages to free himself by directing a qi blast to her face, forcing Sha Hualing to back off with a shriek of protest.

It does allow Binghe to push for the first time. He's quick to close the distance, Zheng Yang shining golden as it catches the sun, a stab that misses, an attempt to cut at Sha Hualing's legs that she only jumps over like some freaky trampoline jumper. When she leaps forward to get at Binghe, he manages to knock one knife out of her hands with the pommel of Zheng Yang. It earns him a vicious snarl and four bleeding lines across his cheek from where Sha Hualing scratched him in the most vicious slap possible.

The protagonist should win? Right?? *Right???*

Sure, Binghe struggled in the original, but he did manage to win in the end. But that was an untrained Binghe against the demon holding Shen Yuan- how much stronger is Sha Hualing? She's a Saintess. What does that even mean? Fuck, he should have asked Airplane.

Every thought is another attempt to stay aware. A scramble of observations and memories of the plot. Shen Yuan is so focused on it all that when the demon holding him leans down low enough that Shen Yuan catches the scent of something rotten from his breath–

Well, he wasn't prepared for it. He nearly gags.

“Has the little cultivator seen my armor?” the demon asks as nausea swirls at the back of Shen Yuan’s mouth, acidic sourness, “has he noticed the poison? Would the little cultivator want to know the name of it?”

Shen Yuan shakes his head, not daring to risk opening his mouth for fear of losing the battle of *don’t barf.* Did all the demons eat rotten meat before they arrived? *Why?*

“Without a Cure,” the demon breathes, and Shen Yuan would totally fake surprise if not for the fact that the rotting scent is *closer,* “is harmless to us demons, but to you *humans?* Your blood and spiritual energy will be strangled within your own core, and then you will die a slow death, fitting for weak filth such as your kind.”

Before them, Binghe uses a qi blast that singes Sha Hualing’s hair. She pounces, pinning him to the ground before he knees her in the gut for it, forcing her off of him. He follows with a slice through the air that makes Zheng Yang glow golden again, broadening his range but Sha Hualing manages to avoid getting her arm cut off and then she throws a knife that pierces Binghe’s shoulder and *fuck*–

“Binghe!” he yells.

The demon holding him laughs, a low rumbling sound.

“Yes, try to escape,” he says, and slowly squeezes, and- wait- “it will make it *all* your fault when this elder poisons you.”

Shen Yuan feels the spikes dig against his clothes, not piercing through to the skin but putting pressure in a slow, dreadful way and–

He remembers reading about how to manipulate adrenaline. The qi equivalent of an epipen, to stave off poison and allergies. He’s all run out from before, his broken wrist a steady, throbbing pain, but he *knows how to do it.*

(User has chosen Option: 1, Induce Adrenaline!)

The energy that returns feels like something burning, like he is near a qi deviation. But it’s *controlled.* It’s his, washing away the pain, the nausea, the weakness of before. His heart beats like a drum. Shen Yuan remembers the talismans in his sleeves and he shakes them loose, one ending up in his unhurt hand.

All it needs is a touch of qi to explode into blinding light.

The demon’s hold on him slackens in surprise, and Shen Yuan uses that moment to twist out of the hold, the sound of fabric tearing as he forms a sword seal. Fu Yue unsteadily lifts from where it had been left on the ground, and then it shoots forward like a spear of deadly moonlight, making Sha Hualing and Luo Binghe whip their heads around–

The Sky-Hammer Elder demon narrowly avoids being stabbed through; Fu Yue knicks his throat, blood beading from the cut, but that’s *fine,* he can just send Fu Yue again or qi blast if

that fails and–

Shen Yuan blinks, and he's on the ground, cheek pressed against the bloodied stones of the plaza. His head hurts, a sharp and stabbing pain as claws dig against his scalp.

"Naughty," Sha Hualing's voice says, "don't you know hostages are meant to behave?" and oh. She is the one pinning him down, her hand is in his hair. Wasn't she fighting? Shen Yuan's vision is swimming and ah. Maybe adrenaline was a bad choice.

"Let him go!" Binghe yells. He's fuzzy around the edges, his face a blur of colors. Shen Yuan's head hurts *so much.*

"He tried to kill me," Sky-Hammer Elder complains, "the little brat!"

"He's not even that strong," Sha Hualing huffs, "you messed up! I can't even trust you with *this?* I'm taking over. Ling-er won!" she yells out, and Shen Yuan squeezes his eyes shut, her voice too close, too loud for his aching head, "I drew the most blood!"

Unseen to Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe shakes with rage; blood dripping from the many cuts he has suffered, holding Zheng Yang with one hand as it pulses with golden warmth. Sha Hualing grins at him, eyes slow as they travel, lingering on the knife still stuck in his shoulder, and then her grin widens as she watches Luo Binghe take one furious step forward.

"It was a draw," Shen Qingqiu says with a mask of cold indifference, blocking Luo Binghe off before he can get any further, "what demon is willing to fight next?" He looks towards the one that had held Shen Yuan, and sneers. "Perhaps none are challenging enough, if a weak child can hurt someone covered in such armor," he says, derision dripping from his voice, "it might be better for your kind to leave before this master kicks you out like dogs."

Baiting, Shen Yuan thinks, and the demon takes it; hook, line and sinker.

"This one will fight next," Sky-Hammer Elder shouts, stepping closer, closer- is he going to step *over* Shen Yuan? But Sha Hualing is holding him down, surely not–

A massive foot lands on his uninjured hand; the weight a horrible pressure, and then it grinds down, followed by a strange, creak-popping feeling as the bones in his hand *cracks.*

Shen Yuan screams.

"Oops," Sha Hualing says as the demon continues forward, passing them by with a filthy grin on his face, smugly satisfied, "ah, the elder must watch where he steps! Poor little cultivator," she says, not seeming sad at all, "Ling-er will take good care of you! See what happens, when you try and do your little sword trick?"

Fuck, Shen Yuan thinks, gasping for air, the pain feeling like it's lodged in his *lungs,* fuck! What is this? *Whump?* Why is he- *Binghe* is the protagonist, A-Ying is the wife, why–

Not that he wants them hurt. It's just- it's just-

“This master,” Shen Qingqiu says, voice cutting through the haze of pain muddling Shen Yuan’s mind, “will take the challenge.”

The demon falters.

Sha Hualing yanks Shen Yuan upright, forcing him to sit. He sways, arms held behind his back once more, and feels the pointed chin of the demoness dig into his shoulder as she stays behind him. His own chin feels sticky and gross- blood?

“Go forward,” Sha Hualing taunts as the Sky-Hammer demon hesitates, “did the elder not volunteer? It is alright! Master Shen agreed on no lethal attacks, did he not? And *surely* Master Shen would not break Ling-er’s promise!”

The demon clenches his fists and steps full forward.

Shen Qingqiu does the same.

He looks small, facing the demon. Gray skin and spiky armor, towering above the man in green. The fluttering fabric, the long sleeves. He looks elegant and nearly dainty in comparison. But, Shen Yuan thinks, blinking as his eyes sting from the pain, small does not mean weak.

Shen Qingqiu raises Xiu Ya in a *‘come hither’* gesture.

The armored demon rushes forward, surprisingly fast for his size as he pulls one fist back for a punch. Without moving, Shen Qingqiu swings sideways in an arc of bright white, and the demon’s hand lands next to Shen Yuan, a splatter of warm blood staining his white robes.

Behind him, he can feel Sha Hualing sit up straight, her hold on his wrists tightening painfully enough to steal his breath away.

“You!” the demon shouts, stepping backwards, clutching his bleeding stump, “how dare-!”

“It is not lethal,” Shen Qingqiu replies, and then smiles a grim kind of smile, his green eyes glittering like shards of ice, “but you are correct. This master should have taken a different limb.”

The Sky-Hammer Elder snarls and lunges forward, perhaps hoping to get to the Peak Lord before he can raise his sword once more. But Shen Qingqiu *moves.* There and then gone, only to appear behind the demon, flicking blood off of Xiu Ya as he comes to a stop.

The demon falls with a roar of pain, now missing a foot. The foot which, Shen Yuan realizes as he gapes, was the one that broke his hand.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes meet his. And then they meet Sha Hualing’s, and his smile is probably the most terrifying thing that Shen Yuan has ever seen.

“That is,” Sha Hualing says, a forced cheer to her voice even as Shen Yuan can *feel* how tense she is, absurdly enough reminding him of when he kneeled by Lady Jia’s side, waiting for her to lose her temper and not daring to move because of it, “very impressive, Master Shen.”

“Demons are easily impressed,” Shen Qingqiu replies, and turns to cut off Sky-Hammer Elder’s other hand as well. It’s cool. It’s horrible. It’s very, very gross, and the scene is not something his nausea and headache and *everything* welcomes. The sounds are not helping either- Sky-Hammer’s screams of pain barely audible through the racket of everything else, cultivators cheering and demons yelling abuse. It’s so loud.

Shen Yuan swallows back bile, and then Sha Hualing stands up and forces him to do the same. Or at least there is an attempt; his knees buckle, every muscle feeling like jelly. If Shen Yuan thought he had felt awful *before* he pushed adrenaline through his system, well. Clearly he was an idiot.

“Stand *up,”* the demoness hisses through the ruckus all around them, her shorter stature now a disadvantage as she tries to keep him upright, “stop being so weak!”

“I’m trying,” he slurs back.

Sha Hualing lets loose a frustrated snarl, backing up and dragging Shen Yuan with her as Shen Qingqiu casually cuts off the last foot. The demon is not *quite* human stick yet. Only hands and feet have been cut off, not the arms and legs. But it’s a pretty good start. The Elder is screaming, blood pouring in thick rivers from him.

“Shouldn’t,” Shen Yuan gets out in between gasps of pain and dizzying, nauseous pain, “shouldn’t you stop that?”

“The Saintess has no need for a weakling,” Sha Hualing says, and then they both scream as a snow white burst of energy hits too close to them, cutting a jagged line a mere inch away from their feet. Then Sha Hualing shrieks again and stumbles forward, nearly forcing Shen Yuan to fall over, as another sword glare cuts her off from the crowd of demons.

Shen Qingqiu points Xiu Ya at them.

“Are the demons leaving?” he softly asks, and yet Shen Yuan thinks every single one there can hear him. All sound has stopped, breaths held and the tension so thick he can nearly taste it.

Or maybe that’s just the scent of blood, so pungent that he swears he can taste the iron of it.

“No! Of course not,” Sha Hualing laughs, too shrill to be convincing, “we were simply getting a better view! This Ling-er only wants to admire Master Shen from the *best* angle.”

Shen Qingqiu’s does not look very impressed at all.

“That’s lethal, though!” one stupidly brave demon yells, pointing a claw at the thrashing,

bleeding out demon on the ground, “that is not what the Saintess allows!”

“Did she not say an arm for an arm earlier?” Shen Qingqiu replies, “this master is simply enacting justice.”

Well, if he *was,* he would be cutting off Sha Hualing’s hand first. But Shen Yuan gets the idea, really. The original Luo Binghe *did* take on that philosophy too. Reward kindness twice, but return vengeance ten times. Though Shen Yuan is the injured party here.

Shen Qingqiu just likes having an excuse for doing some torture.

“Master Shen is truly impressive,” Sha Hualing says, and ah, there is the knife again. Once more it presses against Shen Yuan’s throat, now a little lower than before. That’s, uh, nice. It means if he stumbles, less risk of *immediate* death, “and has clearly won this round! Third and last one, and then we shall all leave, having learned a good lesson indeed.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrow.

Shen Yuan is almost impressed by the stubbornness of the demoness. Even now, when she is so clearly outnumbered and has done the worst version of *fuck around and find out,* she insists on the third round. Is it because of the plot? That can’t be it. Right? Maybe?

What’s Binghe doing?

“Get the elder out of the way,” Sha Hualing orders, and demons slowly slink forward, like dogs with tails between theirs legs as they keep an wary eye on the Peak Lord before them.

Shen Qingqiu does not move as they drag the now quietly groaning demon away, but he holds himself like a tiger ready to pounce. Shen Yuan blinks, colors swimming, and he can’t see Binghe. Or Ning Yingying. Ming Fan is there- pale and wide eyed, and he thinks he can see Chen Xiaoling hiding behind him. But he can’t see his friends.

And Liu Mingyan–

Steps forward.

“This one volunteers,” she firmly declares.

At once, he feels Sha Hualing relax.

Which! She! Shouldn’t!

Because the *order is wrong.*

“What?” she says, and oh, did he say that outloud? Well, that’s dumb. He shouldn’t do that. Shen Yuan wiggles, then realizes that is a very bad idea, actually, because everything fucking hurts. So he stops.

“Nuthin’,” he says, and he blinks and suddenly Liu Mingyan is in the middle, facing down the one armed demon that Shen Qingqiu was meant to fight. She holds Shui Se to her side, unsheathed and gleaming. It’s very pretty. Not as pretty as Binghe, though, who is sneaking around the side as Liu Mingyan and the demon begins to fight. Shen Yuan thinks it’s probably best to not look towards Binghe, so he looks away.

Besides, he has never seen Liu Mingyan fight *and* she was his favorite wife. He should pay attention, even if he is nauseous from the pain, every movement hurting and he quite possibly has bitten his own lips bloody after everything. Shen Yuan can’t miss this.

Shui Se’s sword glare is like watercolors.

A purple that looks so soft it shouldn’t be able to cut anything; like it is paint bleeding through paper, except it’s the air and the plaza’s stone that is being cut into, the sword glare only breaking against the one armed demon’s qi like water against the shore. It is beautiful, and honestly maybe he does have a concussion, and maybe it’s affecting his sense of reality because that is just way too pretty to be useful! And yet!

Well, at least Shui Se is a fitting name.

Shen Yuan is tugged backwards. He blinks, and the fight is blocking the sight of Shen Qingqiu. That must be why Sha Hualing is making a new attempt to drag him towards the crowd of demons once more.

“Wha-” he gets out before she presses the knife closer.

“Not a sound,” she snarls against his ear, and Shen Yuan turns his head to reply, except he meets Binghe’s eyes. Sha Hualing’s grasp on his wrists tighten, and Shen Yuan hisses in pain, but then he can feel how she turns her head to look where he is looking and he can’t let her do that.

Shen Yuan stomps down on one naked foot.

Sha Hualing drops her knife as she shrieks in shocked pain, the weapon clattering to the stone floor. The fight hiccups before them, the sound loud enough to cut through the cheers of both sides.

The demoness screams even louder when Shen Yuan bites her hand hard enough to taste blood. And then Binghe is there, sending all three of them to the floor before Sha Hualing can claw Shen Yuan’s throat out. The pain when he falls is enough to make his mind go blank.

By the time Shen Yuan’s brain comes back online, Binghe is standing before him, a shield against Sha Hualing as she snarls like a feral cat, flexing her claws and ready to pounce. One of Binghe’s arms hangs uselessly, the one where his shoulder was stabbed, the knife now deeper, blood dripping down. His other arm is held high, Zheng Yang once more pointed at Sha Hualing.

Shen Yuan blinks, and there is Liu Mingyan, about to defeat her opponent even as Shen Qingqiu moves past her, Xiu Ya unsheathed. A flash of green and he's past them, going in for the kill and–

Liu Qingge arrives with a sword glare of blue fire.

In one blow, he splits the one armed demon down the middle and sends Sha Hualing flying with the shockwave that follows, just in time for her to avoid Shen Qingqiu's attempt on her life. In one blow, he has the demons running for the hills, Sha Hualing quicker than all of them.

In one blow, he steals his sister's spotlight.

What a dick move, Shen Yuan thinks as Binghe falls to his knees beside him, his best friend's words muffled and far away, and–

So anticlimactic, is his last thought, before, at last, everything goes black.

The very last thing he sees is Binghe crying.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ, arrived 1 second ago: wow I can't believe the brat is still a weak bitch.
Also SQQ: I'm Going To Make An Example Out of This Demon For No Particular Reason.

How is Sha Hualing still alive? Insert Kronk Meme of "it doesn't make sense!"
The reason is that I love her.

Haha!!! A few hours later, I am finally able to upload the next chapter :D
This was a challenging one! I'm not used to writing such a Long Scene, and with so many characters??? Goodness me. Hopefully it makes up for the last cliffhanger <3

Thank you all so much for the patience!

GUYS FANARTS WOW!!!

yourgaygrandpa made two! One lovely amazing BingYuan and ALSO the gay uncles !!!

Meanwhile threading fate made a book cover of the fic!!! Gasp!!!

Thank you all for reading and for this LOVELY AMAZING fanarts!!! Reminder, if you guys want to show off anything you've made (fanart, memes, tiktoks etc) feel free to leave a comment or tag me on tumblr :D

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Shen Yuan wakes up, there is a pangolin.

It takes a moment for him to figure out what it is. Blearily staring at the strange mass before him, slowly blinking as he takes it in. The room is mostly dark, only a candle lit nearby. It is just enough to make the sight before him hazy around the edges, like a strange dream outlined by golden light.

The animal is curled up on his chest, looking like a massive pinecone with its face hidden under its tail. It is a warm weight, comforting and bizarre all at once. The runes on its scales glow a soft blue, pulsing with each breath. Its claws twitch as it snuffles in its sleep.

It must be what woke him up, he thinks, and raises a hand to pet it.

“Don’t do that,” someone says, gently pressing his arm back down before he can touch the pangolin. Mind slow, he turns his face to see who it is, and meets the dark eyes of Wei Qingwei. The Wan Jian Peak Lord sits by the candle, a book held open in his free hand. His hair is loose for once, the gray strands glinting like silver in the candle light. The bronze crown he wore when they first met lies next to the candle, which in turn is next to a tray holding two cups and a pitcher.

As Shen Yuan stares, the man smiles, eyes crinkling at the corners. Crow feet, Shen Yuan thinks, and Wei Qingwei tilts his head just like the bird itself.

“Xiao-Shen is awake. This Shishu is happy to see it,” he says, leaning back in his seat, “though it truly is a funny time to do so. Just as everyone but this one left.”

Wei Qingwei winks.

“It must mean I’m your favorite uncle!”

(+5 F-points!)

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

“Why is Shishu in my room?” he asks, or tries to. It comes out as a weird, raspy slurring of nonsense and suddenly, Shen Yuan realizes just how dry his mouth is. Not to speak of the headache. Actually, the more he wakes up, the more things *sucks.* Why does everything ache? He grimaces, shifting where he lays.

“Ah, yes. Water. A-Fang did say you would be thirsty, once you woke up,” Wei Qingwei says, “but Xiao-Shen can’t drink laying down! Let this uncle help you sit up.”

Shen Yuan rather thinks he could do that by himself. But he doesn't get to say as much before Wei Qingwei has slid the sleeping pangolin down to his lap, put several pillows behind Shen Yuan and boom, he's sitting.

And he looks at his hand, which is in a splint, and he looks at his other arm, which is in a cast. Shen Yuan stares, and then he looks around and oh. Oh this is *not* his bedroom, actually. There are the familiar medicine pouches hanging from the bed posts, and a window that lets him see the moonlight wash over Qian Cao Peak. It is not the view one gets at Mu Qingfang's house, which means he's in one of the healer buildings. That makes sense.

And then Shen Yuan realizes his hand and wrist are *broken* and that Wei Qingwei is holding a cup of water to his face, smiling expectantly and *oh no*.

His entire face burns.

Wei Qingwei's smile widens.

"If Xiao-Shen does not want this uncle's help, I can always wake up Shizhi's friend," he says, and nods off to the side. Shen Yuan squints through the darkness, and- there, a second bed, and the silhouette of someone sleeping under the blanket, the shadows so dark he can hardly see them at all. But he knows, instinctively, who it is.

Something he hadn't known was tense, relaxes at the sight.

Looking away from Binghe, Shen Yuan sighs and, still blushing from embarrassment, leans in to drink from the cup which Wei Qingwei holds up. And as long as he ignores that he needs help drinking water, it's very nice. Water! Holy shit! His throat is healed, his mind at peace. Water! The most powerful of all liquids! It might as well be a miracle cure for *everything*.

He clears his throat.

"Don't wake Binghe," he whispers, sounding human again, "please."

"Oh, this uncle doubts he will wake up anytime soon," Wei Qingwei replies, putting the now empty cup down, "A-Fang had him drink the tea that knocks one out. To sew up that stab wound, of course, but also because the boy was quite emotional over Shizhi." He winks. "Very sweet. Xiao-Shen must be happy."

Shen Yuan doesn't know why the man is winking, but it doesn't help with his blush. He huffs and looks down at his fucked up hands instead.

"... may this one ask where Mu-shishu is?" he asks.

"Not sleeping," Wei Qingwei wryly replies, opening his book once more, "but if we are lucky, perhaps this one can convince him to find a bed."

Ew.

“For sleep,” the man says, amused, “ah, Xiao-Shen, so naughty.”

Shen Yuan’s blush grows warmer.

“This one doesn’t know what Shishu is implying,” he mumbles, refusing to look at him, “this one was just wondering about- about healing and what I’m allowed to do, so…”

“A-Fang didn’t say, but I’m sure he will return once he’s wrapped everything up, to ensure that Shizhi remains in one piece. It was quite ambitious of you to injure both hands! It would ease this uncle’s heart, if Shizhi promises to never repeat it.”

“It’s not like I meant to,” he protests, “it just- it just happened.”

Nothing went like it was supposed to. Was that why it all went so bad? If… if he hadn’t managed to get Chen Xiaoling into Qing Jing Peak, would the demons not have attacked so fiercely? If they hadn’t gotten their swords early…

Shen Yuan remembers how Zheng Yang glowed like the sun, and he remembers the cold sureness of Fu Yue in his hands.

“Where’s my sword?” he blurts out, realizing he can’t see it anywhere in the room, even though Zheng Yang is *right there,* leaning against the wall next to Binghe’s bed.

“Shen-shixiong has it,” Wei Qingwei says, and when Shen Yuan stares at him in horror, he shrugs. “He will return it, I’m sure. But as you must know, Shixiong was in a foul mood. It seemed best, to let him hold it for now. Just until he calms down.”

Shen Yuan does *not* find that reassuring, thanks!!!

What if he locks Fu Yue away? What if he swaps it for, like, a wooden sword? Or something? He doesn’t know! He doesn’t know why Shen Qingqiu would want it if *not* for evil shit! Though-

Well, he won’t beat Shen Yuan. He remembers that, from the last time they spoke before the man left for seclusion. But that doesn’t mean Fu Yue is safe, does it? Especially after the death glares thrown his way during the whole… Sha Hualing thing. His hands feel numb.

“Is Shishu *really* sure he will return it?”

“It would be quite *cutting* of him to not return a blade,” Wei Qingwei says, using that tone he does when telling a joke. Shen Yuan does not have time for that, thanks.

“But–”

“But he will return it. Shen-shixiong has a temper, but he would not withhold a spirit sword from its wielder. And something tells this uncle that Fu Yue is not one to be locked up.”

How can Wei Qingwei trust that? Still, the words are good to hear. The reminder that Fu Yue can return if Shen Yuan calls for it eases his mind. Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and lets it out. His scalp itches. He looks down at his hands and wonders if his scalp will itch forever now. If Binghe was awake, he could maybe ask for help, but…

“Xiao-Shen should go back to sleep,” the man says, turning a page in his book, “A-Fang is quite busy with everything else, and won’t be able to visit until it has all settled down. And Xiao-Shen is quite popular; you will need energy for the morning, when your visitors arrive.”

Visitors? Binghe is right there.

Though there is Ning Yingying, of course. Maybe Ming Fan, if only to yell at him before Shen Qingqiu can do it. Though it is unpleasant, being reminded of the fact that Mu Qingfang is too busy to visit. The implications are not good.

“... did… did anyone die?”

He remembers the man from An Ding Peak, the way his head cracked against the plaza. But had there been more? There must have been. Shen Yuan remembers the fires burning from afar, the dormitories with all the kids. The cut off limbs scattered across the plaza, the frenzy of demons tearing into anyone they could catch.

The knife stuck in Binghe’s shoulder.

“None of Qing Jing,” Wei Qingwei says, and Shen Yuan feels guilty relief for it, “though only Shizhi’s tiny Shimei was fully unharmed.”

“What? But- I didn’t see A-Ying,” he says, heart beating, and fuck, Ming Fan and Heng He… Shen Yuan had *seen* them, during the hostage thing, but Ming Fan had been half-hidden behind Shen Qingqiu and Heng He had stayed back and how hurt was A-Ying, if he hadn’t seen the girl after Sha Hualing kicked her–

“She scraped her knees while running to get Liu-shidi, nothing worse than that,” Wei Qingwei reassures him, a gentle hand pushing Shen Yuan back. He hadn’t even realized he had begun to sway from sitting up too straight. Wow. How fucked up *is* he? “Rest, Shizhi.”

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, and then his stomach growls. He shuts his mouth with a blush. Wei Qingwei’s grin is a wry thing, full of amusement and dimples. He closes the book with a snap.

“This Shishu shall secure some food for a growing boy,” he teases, “so don’t move while I’m away.”

“I don’t need-”

“A growing child must be fed, always,” Wei Qingwei says, poking Shen Yuan’s forehead

before he can react, “so stay here, and let this uncle provide for his Shizhi. Do *not* try to get out of bed.”

Shen Yuan sighs and sinks back down, watching the man leave.

As if he *could* move. Shen Yuan’s meridians feel like overcooked noodles, all jelly and weird. He lays there for a moment, really feeling the aching that seems to be everywhere. He looks at the pangolin, still peacefully asleep. Why is it there?

It’s not fair that he can’t pet it.

Shen Yuan looks towards Binghe.

His friend sleeps. If Shen Yuan stares long enough, he can see how the dark shape moves, just a bit, as Binghe breathes in and out. He stares, and it’s silly. Wei Qingwei only just left. Binghe is right there; the room isn’t even that big. And yet–

It’s so quiet.

He really wants to feel Binghe against his side. He wants to press his cold feet against his best friend’s warm ones, to bury his face in thick curls and breathe in the scent of home, because it still feels like there is the stench of blood in the air, growing stronger the longer he sits there.

His eyes are burning.

Shen Yuan looks out the window instead, blinking rapidly.

Why is he upset? It doesn't make sense.

They survived.

Binghe is still asleep by the time Mu Qingfang arrives.

The sun has only just begun to rise enough to outline the buildings outside, grass and roof tiles glittering with frost as he stares out the window. The pangolin continues to snooze in his lap, and Wei Qingwei is sharpening a knife.

He is *always* sharpening a knife. Often enough that it has become a soothing sound, something that makes Shen Yuan think of breakfasts and slowly waking mornings. He wonders how often he will hear it now, with Shen Qingqiu back.

But upon Mu Qingfang's arrival, the Wan Jian Peak Lord's face lights up. The knife and whetstone is swiftly abandoned next to the empty food bowls as the man quickly closes the space between them. He pulls Mu Qingfang close, the healer for once not protesting as–

Shen Yuan hurriedly looks away; face burning as he can still *hear* the soft sound of a kiss.

"Good morning, A-Fang," Wei Qingwei says, voice so tender that Shen Yuan thinks he might just die, "the savior of the sect, healer of all. Are you well?"

"This one looks forward to sleep," is the wry reply, and then *another* kiss can be heard, ew, before Mu Qingfang continues with, "and I'm pleased to see that Shizhi is awake."

Shen Yuan sneaks a peek; upon seeing that the two men aren't even holding hands anymore– Wei Qingwei is tying his hair up, and *why* is it so hard to look away from how the tattoos crawl up his nape, what the fuck– he is flooded with relief, knowing he's now somewhat safe from gay PDA. It makes it much easier to smile at Mu Qingfang.

"Good morning, Mu-shishu."

Mu Qingfang smiles back, and when he holds his hands out, Shen Yuan does not hesitate to gingerly place his own in them. Immediately he can feel the way the healer's qi swoops through his meridians, soft and neutral, on the edge of clinical. It's a little tingly, which is new. Probably because of the stupid adrenaline thing he did- *never again.* Dumbest decision ever, shortly after getting hostaged by Sha Hualing.

She had been so *touchy.*

The reminder of the demoness is stupid. Shen Yuan pushes the thought away, and instead focuses on Mu Qingfang.

He truly does look tired.

Not at first glance; being an Immortal Cultivator means that he rarely has need of something as silly as *sleep.* But Shen Yuan has been around the man often enough to feel secure in saying that the guy is exhausted. There are no dark bags under his eyes, no messy hair, and *yet*...

In his lap, the pangolin yawns, its long, thin and very pink tongue suddenly stretching out like a wiggly worm. He has to bite back a laugh at the sight. The animal stretches out like a very big, very clumsy cat, its large claws catching on the blanket as it does.

"Perfect timing," Wei Qingwei says, and then the warm weight of the pangolin is swept up into the Peak Lord's arms. A sound escapes Shen Yuan's lips before he can stop it, and Wei Qingwei gives him a reassuring grin, "do not worry, Shizhi. This one will return with Soot at a later date."

"Soot?" Shen Yuan asks, and hopes it doesn't sound as whiny as he thinks it is, "is that its

name?"

"Yes, it likes to sleep in the coal piles by the forges. This uncle of yours had to give Soot a bath before A-Fang let me bring it here. Bathing a pangolin is not for the weak! They do not want to be in the bath, they want to pangol *out."*

That pun was disgusting. Shen Yuan grimaces.

"And it will receive another one if it is to return," Mu Qingfang says, ignoring the horrors that is his boyfriend's stupid sense of humor, instead carefully lowering Shen Yuan's hands back down, before he goes over to Binghe's bed. There, he tugs the blanket down enough until he can press a hand to the bandaged shoulder. Shen Yuan's eyes linger there, wondering if he had imagined the spots of red bleeding through the white cloth, or if Binghe needs to change his bandages. How much longer until Binghe wakes up? How strong was the tea? Or is he just very tired, from such an important story event?

"Of course, Shixiong," Wei Qingwei agrees as Soot the pangolin loops itself around his shoulders, its beady eyes blinking sleepily. "Now, this master shall leave. Do not forget to rest, A-Fang."

"Wan Jian Peak needs its Lord," Mu Qingfang replies, "so do not linger here. But yes, Wei-ge. I will rest soon." And Wei Qingwei laughs and leaves with a wave.

Silence settles. Mu Qingfang tucks Binghe back in, and maybe Shen Yuan imagined the red after all, the bandages seeming perfectly pristine before they are once more out of sight. And then the man sits down where Wei Qingwei had been, and something in the way he holds himself–

Shen Yuan tenses.

"This master would like to hear Shizhi's reasoning for using the Quickening of Qi technique," the man says.

He is not smiling.

Mu Qingfang *always* smiles. Not as big and cheerful as Wei Qingwei, but he is always smiling. Now his face is serious, and the sight makes Shen Yuan's insides curdle, his heart beating a little faster.

"... may this one ask Shishu how he knew this one used the Quickening of Qi?" he asks, and wishes he could hide his hands in his sleeves. Stupid cast, stupid splinters.

"Shizhi's meridians show clear signs of it." Mu Qingfang pauses. He looks for a moment. "Is disciple Shen aware of how the technique is meant to be used?"

The qi version of an epipen, he doesn't say.

"It helps to keep a patient alive until one can apply proper healing?" He says it like a

question, even though he *knows* he is right. But Mu Qingfang's face is just so neutral, and what does it mean, that Shen Yuan's meridians show clear signs of it? He *aches,* yes, all over and inside, but– "it increases the blood flow and it can help one's breathing, and is only meant for, um, for emergencies."

"What are possible side effects?"

"... dizziness, headaches and, ah, pain? And weakness."

"Why would one only use this in an emergency to keep a patient alive?"

"Shishu, why–"

"This one would like an answer to the question, disciple Shen."

His voice is firm, not cruel. And yet Shen Yuan flinches and looks down at his hands. It's a struggle to remember the answer. But Mu Qingfang, despite this, simply sits and waits for Shen Yuan to figure it out.

"It can make symptoms worse, if applied for the wrong reason," he slowly says, glancing towards the man's hands. They remain in his lap. Relaxed. "And… and if care is not… not given to the patient shortly after the technique, the patient's health can quickly decline?"

"In what manner may it decline?"

Shen Yuan hesitates.
This time, Mu Qingfang does not wait.

"The Quickening of Qi technique does not only cause physical side effects such as headaches, dizziness and pain. It is also capable of spawning minor heart demons. If one does not apply it properly, or receives the proper care directly after, the minor heart demons can grow and fester into something worse. Qi deviations are not uncommon. Disciple Shen is aware of how serious qi deviations can become?"

"... yes."

"What does disciple Shen think can happen, if one is to use the technique when already exhausted from pain?"

Shen Yuan swallows.

"This one- this one assumes-"

"This master does not want assumptions."

"... this one is unsure, Shishu."

"Mistakes," Mu Qingfang says, and Shen Yuan stares at the man's hands, still relaxed, still

visible, still in his lap, “which can be deadly. Upon disciple Shen’s arrival to this peak, he was suffering from several minor qi deviations in the form of seizures, which in turn exaggerated his injuries. Disciple Shen’s meridians were torn, his spiritual pathways wrung dry. This complicated the treatment to ensure that the minor qi deviations would not repeat nor mutate into something deadlier.”

“I–”

“Did disciple Shen use a healing technique meant for others, on himself, during a situation where he was suffering from compromised decision making?”

Shen Yuan’s eyes are burning. His throat feels tight.

“Disciple Shen–”

“Yes!” he chokes out, and then has to catch his breath, as if he ran a marathon instead of just *sitting there,* like an idiot, “yes, this- I- yes.”

“Does disciple Shen understand that this was a mistake?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan bites his lip, tears spilling over as the man continues, “does he understand how close he came to permanently damaging his cultivation? His body?”

He can’t speak, so he just nods.

“Why did disciple Shen decide on this action?”

Poison. There had been poison, he thinks, but if he says it out loud, it will hurt. It will be like swallowing gravel, he is sure. So he doesn’t say anything. The tears fall, and he can’t even wipe them away because he’s a failure.

Mu Qingfang sighs. The hands lift from his lap, and Shen Yuan flinches before the hands settle *gently* on his face. Tilting it upwards, and a soft cloth cleans his face and somehow, it just makes him cry *harder.*

“Yuan-er is safe,” Mu Qingfang says, wiping away the tears that just won’t stop, “this master is happy that he is safe. This master will *not* punish Yuan-er. I simply do not want you to do something so dangerous again. Do you understand?”

“I do,” he hiccups, and when Mu Qingfang hugs him, careful to not jostle his hands, Shen Yuan leans into it and hides his face against the man’s shoulder. He feels ridiculous, fifteen and sobbing like he’s about to die. But Mu Qingfang still hugs him, hands not touching his hair, but pouring qi into his spiritual veins. Healing him, even though he fucked up.

He doesn’t know how long it takes before the tears run dry. But by the end of it, he feels like he could sleep forever. He feels like a stone thrown into water, heavy and clumsy and doing nothing but going down.

Mu Qingfang applies healing salve to the cuts on his throat, to the scratches on his arm- and

Shen Yuan has a moment of horror, wondering if it's from the poison demon, but no, it's just a scratch, safe and normal and nothing in comparison to everything *else.* He's also told to not try and heal himself. Not that Shen Yuan thinks he could even if he wanted to, feeling empty and drained.

And then Mu Qingfang tucks him in, tells him to rest before visitors arrive, voice soft, face tired but eyes filled with warm patience.

It doesn't make him feel better.

"When will Binghe wake up?" he asks before the healer leaves.

"Not long now," Mu Qingfang assures him, and then Shen Yuan is alone once more, Binghe asleep and too far away.

Just as well; it would be so embarrassing, if his best friend saw Shen Yuan cry like a little baby.

He is so tired.

Shen Yuan does not remember falling asleep. He didn't think he would; sleeping on his back like a corpse, hands on either side, is not a comfortable position. He's used to hugging Binghe or a pillow, to curl into himself and take up as little space as he possibly can, a habit that still lingers from Lady Jia. And yet, somehow, he fell asleep.

He wakes up to Binghe.

The other boy is sitting on Shen Yuan's bed, not looking at him. Too busy with trying to tame his thick curls, which lets Shen Yuan watch for a moment as his best friend stubbornly remains silent as he keeps failing to tie his hair out of the way. His shoulder is fucked up enough that he can't raise his arm properly. He feels fond, seeing Binghe so clearly holding back swearwords. Binghe doesn't like cursing. In *Proud Immortal Demon Way,* he rarely ever did such a thing. Every time Shen Yuan says something so *crude,* his friend looks hilariously shocked.

To think that being unable to tie his own hair nearly breaks that resolve.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth to offer to help him; and then his fingers twitch, pain crashing through his hand like a bumper car with a vendetta. He hisses, the sound enough to have Binghe's eyes snap to him. His dark eyes are clear and wide and for a moment, he freezes. His cheek has stitches in it, Shen Yuan realizes. From when Sha Hualing slapped him,

leaving bleeding wounds behind. They must have been worse than he thought, if they needed stitches.

Shen Yuan tries to sit up, and Binghe snaps back to reality.

“Yuan!” he gasps, and helps him.

“Binghe,” he replies, and hopes that he doesn’t look like he has been crying. His eyes feel puffy and coarse, like he has been blinking away sand. So the chances of not looking like a crybaby is low. Still, Shen Yuan raises his hand to push a stray curl of hair out of Binghe’s face, to perhaps try and heal his cheek, only to once again be reminded of the stupid cast. He drops it. Binghe pretends to not see it, instead giving him a one armed hug.

He’s truly the bestest friend.

“You’re awake,” Binghe says, audibly relieved.

“So are you,” he replies, and manages a shaky smile, leaning into the hug, and there it is, the scent of home. Shen Yuan closes his eyes and burrows deeper into Binghe’s hair, always so impossibly soft.

It’s nice. It’s the first nice thing he has gotten since he woke up. Well, this and Soot the pangolin.

But for a moment, it’s easy to pretend that he doesn’t have two whole months before he can use his hands again. Just for now, Shen Yuan can pretend like everything is *fine* and that he didn’t fail to do the one thing he’s good at. They sit and hug, the morning light falling onto them, making everything feel just a little bit warmer. Everything is fine.

And then the door slams open.

They both jump, twisting to look, and are met with the wide eyes of Chen Xiaoling and a smiling Ning Yingying.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan says, face turning bright red, “uh, good morning?”

Chen Xiaoling bursts into tears.

Chen Xiaoling somehow ends up in his lap.

It’s an awkward fit, but he can’t bring himself to say no. Binghe is still pressed close to his

side as well, and Ning Yingying sits at the foot of the bed. It feels cramped and weird, but it *is* nice to see that Wei Qingwei wasn't lying. Chen Xiaoling doesn't have a single scratch on her- just a small bruise by her wrist, but one that he's pretty sure she had before the demon invasion.

Ning Yingying, ignoring the fact that she is a girl in a world where showing skin is basically illegal, pulls up her robes to show off the absolute mess that is her legs.

"This one would've rather gotten a face scar, like Dashixiong," she says as Shen Yuan gapes at the large swaths of *red* on her legs, and he can't even see where the bruises and the scrapes meet. *Are* there bruises? Is all of that just skin that she scraped off, running to get the War God? And what does she *mean* that Ming Fan got a facial scar??? When??? How??? Isn't that meant to be a cool character thing? A fun trait to mark the badass in a group? Ming Fan is not a badass!

"What?" Shen Yuan faintly says, Chen Xiaoling's little sniffles briefly muffled as Binghe helps wipe her face clean, though that does nothing for the wet spot of snot and tears against Shen Yuan's shoulder, "Shixiong was injured as well?"

"Everyone were," Ning Yingying says, letting her robes fall back down, "Heng-shixiong was bitten *twice."*

That is…

Shen Yuan stares blankly at the girl. Because, for some reason, the idea of Heng He getting hurt feels almost fake. He's… he's *there.* But he wasn't really present in the original, and so he was never actually hurt. Heng He is not some faceless NPC, like the guy from An Ding whose neck- who–

It feels weird, is all.

"But no one died?" he asks.

"None from Qing Jing Peak," Binghe assures him, which he knew. Obviously. Because Wei Qingwei had said so, and why would the man lie about such a thing?

"It's my fault," Chen Xiaoling says miserably, "the demons wanted to- to eat me."

"And Heng He," Ning Yingying says, "since they bit him twice!"

Chen Xiaoling starts crying again.

"A-Ying!" he scolds, feeling useless, hands too wrapped up to offer any help. All he can do is let the little girl cling to him as she *wails,* great heaving sobs that sound embarrassingly close to the sounds Shen Yuan made earlier, clinging to Mu Qingfang.

"It's true!" Ning Yingying protests, "Heng-shixiong *did* get bitten!"

“That’s not- Binghe, *help.”*

And because Binghe is the only capable person in the room, he does exactly that. He tugs Chen Xiaoling into his own lap and hugs her, rocking back and forth, humming a little tune that Shen Yuan remembers from sleepless nights.

Thankfully, because he *is* the protagonist, it works like a charm.

“What about Shizun?” Shen Yuan asks, once Chen Xiaoling is dozing in Binghe’s lap, more asleep than awake. He’s a little jealous, honestly. It looks very cozy. Not that he would ever sit in Binghe’s lap, obviously. It’s just a *thought.*

The question has his friend’s lips grow thin, dark eyes narrowing.

“Shizun?” Ning Yingying echoes, “Shizun is fine. Did A-Yuan not see him kill those demons?”

Well, yeah. He did. It was memorable. Along with the… dismembering. But that wasn’t really- that wasn’t what he *meant.*

Shen Yuan doesn’t even know what he did mean.

“... right,” he says, exhaustion settling over him, the world suddenly feeling so much heavier. He looks at Ning Yingying and her bright orange ribbons. She looks so normal like this. Like she is meant to look; as if her legs aren’t injured. As if nothing ever happened at all.

Has Meng Mo arrived yet?

The thought is sudden and unwelcome, but once it’s there, he can’t stop. Ning Yingying and Binghe talk, the girl asking questions since apparently she was not there for most of the demon invasion. Their words fade into the background as he worries.

It is too early for the dream demon, is it not?

He looks down at his hands, and then back up at his friends. Ning Yingying has her hands on the bed as she leans in closer, eyes alert but not as bright- he doesn’t think she slept well. The buns on her head aren’t symmetrical. A ribbon is coming undone. Binghe describes the demons to her, allowing her to wheedle out details about his fight with Sha Hualing.

They would tell him, wouldn’t they? He’s weak and not very useful at the moment, but they wouldn’t keep such a big thing from him, would they? Not *Meng Mo.* Even if he’s not a wife, even if he’s just a sidekick that needed rescuing… they would *tell him,* right?

Of course they would.

Besides, he’s only been asleep for a day. In the original, it took a few more for Sha Hualing to send the dream demon to Binghe. So he hasn’t shown up yet.

Maybe he won't show up at all.

Shen Yuan shoves the thought away, nausea tasting sour and awful at the back of his mouth. He can't fuck up the plot even more. He *can't.*

What if it gets worse? What if he stops being able to predict *anything?*

What if he can't stop Binghe from falling into the Abyss?

Cang Qiong Mountain was attacked.

The news rattle within his chest; a strange feeling that Yue Qingyuan cannot find a name for. The message had reached him on his way towards the sect, one day out. A bird sent by Xi Jiao Peak had landed upon his hand and held out its leg, on which the unfortunate news had been tied with a leather strap.

Cang Qiong Mountain was attacked.

The gray stones of Qiong Ding have been smeared with blood. None has tried to remove it yet, for there are more important matters. Children cry as they are settled within the buildings meant for visitors. The smell of burnt wood lingers in the air.

The blackened buildings bring back the memory of years ago, when Yue Qingyuan had stumbled upon a different catastrophe. Back then, he had been alone as he dug through the wreckage, hands trembling and heart stuck in his throat.

Now, he watches as others dig through the rubble. He listens to the reports, and Yue Qingyuan keeps his hands within his sleeves. A demon Saintess and her army, sent running by the combined efforts of Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu. The rainbow bridges are in need of repair, the protective barriers must be remade and strengthened. There are demands to get revenge; Tang Qingling, Qi Qingqi and Liu Qingge all wish to hunt down the Saintess before she can return to her home.

Cang Qiong Mountain was never attacked during the previous generation. None has dared to

do such a thing for hundreds of years. It speaks of trickery that leaves him wary. Shen Qingqiu calls them idiots as they reconvene to discuss, two swords hanging by his side. He points out how it could be bait, that the Saintess may very well be attempting to lure them away for a second attack.

The others deem him paranoid. Mu Qingfang is too busy to attend.

Yue Qingyuan forbids the hunt.

Qian Cao Peak is overrun with the injured, not having had to handle such a toll since the sealing of Tianlang-Jun. Yi Qingsong has sent out her people to gather the necessary supplies to restock their medicine storage. An Ding and Lie Jiu Peak are working together to create prosthetics for those who were crippled during the invasion.

Shen Yuan was injured as well.

There is a bench outside Shen Qingqiu's home.

He sits upon it and gazes out towards the green bamboo all around; the mountain peaks that have begun to gain spots of white, for winter has arrived and snow has begun to fall. Perhaps it will cover the signs of battle upon Qiong Ding Peak. Perhaps, once Spring arrives, the snow will leave and take the stains of blood with it as it goes.

Yue Qingyuan breathes out. Shen Qingqiu sits down on the far end of the bench. The distance is not enough to be *distant,* but there is space between them that rattles at the thing cradled within his chest, getting stuck between his ribs. They sit in silence.

Normally, he would attempt to break it.

For once he is too tired. The failure weighs him down. It is not like the chains of Xuan Su, bound to his soul, trapping him without keeping him stuck in place. This mistake instead attempts to pull him under, to the depths of dark oceans. It wishes to drown him. It is tiring. He is tired.

Yue Qingyuan is a failure.

He expects Xiao-Jiu to tell him such; to voice the thought out loud, for none other would dare. But Shen Qingqiu sits in silence, too far away to touch without reaching. He sits, and Yue Qingyuan wonders why.

But he is too tired to ask.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: *grabs Fu Yue*
WQW: oh! haha hold up-
SQQ: *HISSES*
WQW: *snatches hand back* okay :D yup! alright Shixiong! This one understands that Shixiong is ONLY safe-keeping for his disciple. Right?
SQQ:
WQW: right?
SQQ: *stalks off*
WQW, stuck on bed-guard duty: RIGHT!?!?!?

slams door open SORRY IM LATE
the chapter was finished hours ago but I, like a fool, decided I needed a nap. Several alarms later, my phone, dog and cat all gave up on me. BUT I AM HERE. I WOKE UP!!! Anyway <3 thanks for the patience.

Also one could call this the hurt/comfort chapter, if we ignore all the mental distress everyone are going through. And I guess we all know why MQF doesn't bother with physical punishments. Personally, I think SY would've rather taken a whip.

Fanart!!

threading fate has yet again made art <3 behold!!!

yourgaygrandpa made some AMAZING qijiu art :0 again!! give them some love pls

theimpurelily made me laugh until it hurt with this meme of Shen Qingqiu being an overachiever :D

Thank you all so much for reading!

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The skies are busy.

All across the Cang Qiong Mountain Peaks, cultivators fly. More than Ming Fan has ever seen all at once; indeed, even when he last attended the Immortal Alliance Conference, it could not compare. Though it is not an impressive thing, not something to be in awe of, as Shizun has made clear. The skies have become a busy street in a busy city; elbow room hard to find, cultivators lowered to the status which once belonged to beasts of burden.

He hates it, though he understands the *necessity* of it all. With the rainbow bridge broken into thousands of glittering shards, a horrifying act by the demon filth that invaded the sect, a mockery of a bridge that has been there since the *founding* of the sect itself-

They can't deliver things via carts, nor can they send the younger disciples on errands that their superiors have no time for. Food must be delivered between peaks; medicines for those who were injured, materials needed in between. Ming Fan feels like an oxen dragging a cart as he lands upon Qian Cao, qiankun pouch stuffed full with elixirs from Zui Xian Peak, arms heavy with wrapped talismans from Lie Jiu Peak.

Heng He, with one injured arm but two steady legs and a healthy golden core, lands beside him, equally burdened.

"Where to, Shixiong?" he asks, and Ming Fan wrinkles his nose as he looks around. He has not often visited Qian Cao Peak, blessed with health and good fortune. They had been tasked to make the deliveries upon visiting Zui Xian and Lie Jiu, but they had been given little information on exactly *where* everything should go.

It is a shame that Shen Yuan is not with them. The brat knows where everything is, Ming Fan is sure of it.

Qian Cao Peak is a big place; Qing Jing is a small oasis in comparison. The temptation to offload it all onto the nearest disciple is heavy. However, with the horrors that they all experienced during the invasion, he does not wish to further burden their healers. It would be shameful.

Ming Fan's face itches.

He was told the stitches could be removed in three days. He wishes it was sooner. They pull awkwardly at his skin, at his mouth. Ming Fan does not enjoy looking at himself in the reflections they pass. The stitches are made of black thread pulled taught, skin puffing between the gaps. He hates it. He *hates it.*

A child walks by them, half of their face wrapped in bandages. From this close, Ming Fan recognizes the smell of ointment, the kind meant to treat burns. The child is only a little older than Chen Xiaoling.

“Let us visit Shen-shidi first,” he decides, looking away, “to ensure he and the little beast are still well. Then, Shen-shidi can offer directions.”

Heng He nods, and off they go.

Finding the building in which the boys reside is not a difficult task. Many see the jade token hanging from Ming Fan’s waist, and they act accordingly.

Not out of respect, he knows.

It is gossip that fuels them. For Ming Fan is the head disciple of Qing Jing Peak, and Shen Yuan’s name has become well known throughout the sect. It is also known that Shen Qingqiu has not visited since the brat was first brought to Qian Cao.

Everyone is curious, and they are foolish enough to think that Ming Fan would gossip about Shizun. They do not understand that Shizun has far too many duties to perform, too many to allow him the time to visit a single child. Do they not themselves see how much there is to do?

They should know better. But they do not, further establishing Qing Jing Peak as the second highest ranked within the sect.

A father can’t always have time for an unruly child, he thinks to himself, Heng He quietly following as they wind their way through the paths of Qian Cao.

Their destination is of the distant kind, the healing building for qi deviations set apart from the others. Not that Ming Fan understands *why* the two brats are held in the building for qi deviations. They most certainly were injured last he saw them! Though, considering how many were injured during the invasion, perhaps it is simply a lack of room.

It is not an unpleasant place, at least.

The building for qi deviations is smaller than the rest and far simpler as well with white walls and a pointed roof of brown tiles, spots of green visible where moss and lichen has been allowed to grow. The purpose of it must be practical, because Ming Fan certainly can’t imagine any other reason why one would *allow* moss to grow.

It is also surrounded by a garden that is beautiful in its simplicity. There is a pond in the middle, the water turned to ice for the winter. Not all of the plants lining the paths have leaves, but those that do also have flowers which frost still clings to. The path itself is neat and orderly, a thin layer of snow that allows him and Heng He to see the footprints of someone before them.

Ming Fan eyes them; there is a smaller set, and there is a larger one. Perhaps large enough to

be Shizun's? Is it then possible that Shen Qingqiu has visited in secret?

It could also be Mu Qingfang. That seems more likely, though Ming Fan finds himself reluctant to entertain it. Surely the Lord of the Peak they stand upon is too busy to simply *visit* a disciple that he has no relation to? Yes, Shen Yuan has certainly spent a lot of time with the man this past year, but there are duties to perform!

Heng He makes a soft sound beside him, and Ming Fan realizes he has been staring at the footprints as they walk. He looks up, eyes narrowed and–

Ming Fan comes to a stop, for before him is not Shizun, nor is it Mu Qingfang or even the beast. It is, instead, a pale little thing in Bai Zhan white and blue, standing near a disciple of Qian Cao. The head disciple which accompanied the brat for some time, he thinks. Reddish-brown hair that has been messily tied back, though it is far neater than what the pale boy beside him has- the boy's hair reminds him of years ago, Zhao De and scissors and Shen Yuan's bloodied face. Choppy and uneven.

His arms are still full with wrapped talismans, and yet Ming Fan has the ridiculous urge to neaten the white hair.

"This one greets Shixiong," the Qian Cao disciple- Zhu Kang, right? He looks like Zhu Zhu, the Bai Zhan girl who broke Heng He's nose once- greets them with a tense smile. The smaller boy behind him is baring his teeth at them like some feral little beast as Zhu Kang continues, "is Ming-shixiong here for a visit?"

He looks at their full arms, and Ming Fan huffs.

"We are here to deliver talismans and healing elixirs," he says, "as well as visiting. This one heard that Shen-shidi and Luo-shidi reside here?"

"Shixiong heard correctly."

"Good," Ming Fan says, and pushes forward, Heng He hesitating half a step before following, and *wait.* Ming Fan stops and looks at the pale little thing. "You're *him,"* he says, and then he glares at Zhu Kang, "why has Zhu-shidi brought *him* here? He will set back Shidi's recovery!"

Oh, Xiao-Shimei had spoken *plenty* of the little monster! The boy had apparently been the reason for when the unfortunate trio had stopped talking to each other, because the little brat did nothing but bite like a mongrel even as Shen Yuan offered to educate him, and then Shen Yuan had acted like a fool and took offense when Xiao-Shimei worried for his well being! Honestly, if not for his appearance, Ming Fan would question the idea of him sharing blood with Shizun.

The point is that an ungrateful, rude, *harmful* child should not be allowed anywhere *near* Ming Fan's shidi! Neither of them! Not when they are both already injured, as well!

"This one will not allow Lin-shidi to do so," Zhu Kang firmly replies, "this one will ensure

that Shen-shidi comes to no harm."

"What about Luo-shidi? This one heard the little beast bit him bloody! In fact, it is quite rude of Zhu-shidi to assume that Shen-shidi will even *want* to be visited by the little beast."

"Shixiong," Heng He says, "this one believes it is best to ask for Shen-shidi's opinion first."

A good idea; except that Shen Yuan was foolishly soft for miserable little creatures, of that Ming Fan had known since day one. He scowls, and considers if he should simply ignore it. He glares at the pale boy who glares right back, hunched the way street dogs tucks their tails between their legs even as they bare their teeth.

Definitely a miserable little creature, he thinks, and despairs and wishes he could simply toss Xiao-Shimei at the beast. She has certainly gained a very… *strange* interest in being violent lately. Perhaps she could be enough to keep the unseemly thing away from the boys until they were healed enough to not need defending.

But Shizun has kept her close since the invasion, and Ming Fan would not wish to earn his ire by taking Ning Yingying with him on errands.

"Very well," he huffs and pushes past Zhu Kang and Lin Jie, "this one shall ensure that Shen-shidi knows what is best for him."

Lin Jie tries to launch forward, only to be yanked back by Zhu Kang.

"No, Shidi," he scolds as Ming Fan passes, "we must let Ming-shixiong and Heng-shixiong visit first. Because Shen-shidi is *their* shidi. No we can't- do not *bite,* please, we cannot crowd in there, it will only stress Shen-shidi–"

Ming Fan scoffs and enters the house and he walks through the halls and he does not *stomp* as he walks. Stomping is rude and uncivilized, and clearly he's not that. So he walks and looks and listens and *there.* Familiar voices, at the very far end of the hallway.

With his arms full, Ming Fan decides against knocking. It is not like the two brats have anything to hide.

He enters, and then stops.

Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan look up from where they sit on the same bed; there is a book in Luo Binghe's lap, a pangolin in Shen Yuan's. *(why is there a pangolin?)* They sit in the white robes of Qian Cao patients, looking perfectly well except for every injury on display and, most importantly–

"Why is your hair like that?" he demands to know, putting the scrolls down on a small table, letting them crowd up against a vase placed there, "it is the middle of the day! This is unacceptable."

And it *is.* Luo Binghe always has had the sense to keep his ridiculously thick mane in neat

braids or at least tucked away somehow. Shen Yuan less so, but the brat at least tries to keep it out of his face. But not now. Now, their hair hangs free, Shen Yuan's fuzzy around the edges in the way hair tends to become when one has just woken up. Luo Binghe's is- well–

"We have *one* arm between us," Shen Yuan grumbles.

"That is only an excuse," Ming Fan scolds, looking for a comb, *is there not a single comb in this room?* He can't let people see this! "But don't worry, this Shixiong shall attend it now. Where are the combs?"

Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both screw their faces up in a very insulting display of disgust. Ming Fan feels himself flush, and he scowls back at them, the movement pulling at the stitches in his skin.

"You two–!"

"This one received help from Ning-shimei," Heng He says as if he did not interrupt, sliding the door shut behind him, "it is why this one has a braid today."

The brats look at him. Shen Yuan's lips twitch upwards.

"Is that also why Heng-shixiong has a bow?"

"Ning-shimei thought it would look flattering."

Ming Fan crosses his arms.

"Very funny," he sourly says, "now, shall we return to the issue at hand? Where can this Dashixiong find a comb?"

"You're *not* touching Yuan's hair."

The disrespect!

After what Shen Yuan can only call a very *screechy* rant about disrespect, unfilial behavior (to whom? who was Shen Yuan and Binghe meant to be *filial* to?) and the importance of personal hygiene (rude, they were both clean if not tidy) , Ming Fan calms down enough to remember he has his own comb and proceeds to pull it out of his pouch. It is a beautiful thing, pale jade with engravings and patterns, something a rich person would have. Classic.

He's still not going to let it touch him.

Shen Yuan watches as Ming Fan's attempts to get at Binghe's hair quickly turns into a slap fight, where Binghe shows a surprising amount of skill at using one arm to ward off, well. A comb. Which will probably be useful later on? Maybe? It could be a knife. If one squints really hard. Binghe certainly acts like it's an instrument of death.

He knows he should tell Binghe to give Ming Fan a chance. They shouldn't both suffer from bad hair, after all, and Binghe's curls deserve to be treated well. Even if Shen Yuan isn't the one doing it.

However, if he *does* ask Binghe to be nice, then perhaps Ming Fan will go for *him* afterwards. Shen Yuan doesn't have *any* arms to defend himself with, and he can't even use qi yet. Soot the pangolin is the laziest creature he has ever met and continues to sleep, providing no defense. Binghe would try to keep the older boy away, obviously, because Binghe is the best.

The keyword is *try.*

Intent does not matter; results do.

The thought comes like a whisper and lands like a slap. Shen Yuan snaps his head towards the door, as if Shen Qingqiu will choose this moment to appear at last, as if the presence of Ming Fan being 'nice' to Binghe will be enough to spawn the man in like a game boss.

The door remains closed.

"Shen-shidi need not worry," Heng He says, "it is only disciple Zhu Kang and a child from Bai Zhan Peak."

Shen Yuan blinks at him.

"Huh?" he says.

Heng He looks back at him, bemused.

"Did Shidi not hear them? Is that not why Shidi looked towards the door?" Heng He asks, dark eyes flicking towards the door as well where, if Shen Yuan concentrates, he can hear muffled voices that he missed before, "Or is it that Shidi would like this one to welcome them inside?"

"Absolutely not!" Ming Fan snaps.

Shen Yuan bristles. He doesn't know why Zhu Kang and what sounds like *Lin Jie* of all people are waiting outside the room, but that doesn't matter. If they are *his* guests, doesn't that make it *his* decision whether or not to invite them? At least they are visiting, unlike some other people of which Shen Yuan won't name.

Even Ming Fan visited. Why hasn't–?

“Why not?” he asks, and he has to hike his legs up a bit, to make sure Soot does not roll out of his lap when the pangolin shifts in its sleep, “if there are guests, should this one not greet them?”

“If it was any other,” Ming Fan says, “but Shidi should not let that thing in here! This one has been told of how the little mongrel bites. If he *must,* then only allow the Qian Cao disciple inside. Not that feral child!”

Binghe’s face twitches as if he wants to grimace. Shen Yuan remembers the last time his best friend met the child, and he thinks about how both of them have been maimed while Lin Jie is, well. Hopefully *not?* Shen Yuan feels like he would have noticed, if the boy had been there that day. Because there is no way that Lin Jie would still be *alive* if he had been there. He would have been torn apart, pale limbs joining the gore that had scattered across all of Qing Ding Peak. As it is, the boy doesn’t have a sword. He can’t even fly.

What if he had been on the rainbow bridge when it broke?

How many *had* been on the bridge as it did?

The thought is awful. His gut churns, and he shakes his head.

“Lin-shidi behaves these days,” he says, and it’s not even a lie, “so if Binghe is… if it is alright with Binghe, this one would like to invite them inside, please.”

For a moment, Binghe looks like he would rather say no.

But maybe Shen Yuan’s stupid, wrapped arms look pathetic enough that his friend can’t help but give in. He watches as Binghe falters, dark eyes glancing between the door, Ming Fan and then back to Shen Yuan. When Shen Yuan offers his best *please?* smile, his friend sighs but nods, and the smile feels a little easier then.

“This one is eager to accept guests,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan huffs a laugh, because Binghe’s eyes don't match his words. Still, Heng He merely nods and ignores Ming Fan’s flustered protests, looking back at them again.

“Does Shidi wish for us to remain? We have many errands to complete,” he tells them, nodding towards the pile of scrolls on the table with the vase. Shen Yuan is kind of impressed it hasn’t toppled to the floor and broken into a million shards yet, with just how many scrolls crowd around it. “But we have time to remain if you wish.”

“We can’t leave them alone with an uncivilized brat,” Ming Fan says, “this one heard he even ate someone’s pet bird!”

Shen Yuan hopes that Lin Jie really didn’t. That doesn’t seem healthy, especially since Lin Jie would have eaten it raw. Maybe even with the feathers still on. Yikes. That probably means he *did.*

“Perhaps,” Heng He mildly replies.

Sometimes, Shen Yuan is very impressed by his pure Bland NPC Vibes.

“Before we leave, we would like instructions on where to go. Is Shen-shidi capable of that? Or perhaps Luo-shidi?” Heng He then asks, “the scrolls contain talismans. This one is aware that Shen-shidi has spent much time here, and that Luo-shidi have often visited upon his returns to the sect. Does this mean either of you could offer guidance on where to deliver these?”

Uhhh. Shen Yuan stares at the talismans, brain not working. He… he *knows* that he knows where to go. He *does.* But the thought is elusive, stubbornly evading him as he tries to remember.

“This one knows,” Binghe says, and Ming Fan huffs and scoffs and finally tucks the comb away once more.

“Then would Shidi like to guide us?” Ming Fan says it like a demand rather than a polite request, and–

Shen Yuan feels nauseous. Which is dumb. Why would the idea of Binghe leaving make him feel *nauseous?* They’re safe. He is safe. *Both* of them are safe, and they’re not hapless children.

“If Shixiong does not mind, this one would prefer to stay here,” Binghe replies, and Shen Yuan breathes out, feeling near dizzy with it, their words distant and muffled as he focuses on breathing through whatever *that* was. By the time he has gathered himself back together, Binghe must have finished telling them where to go.

He must have done it less than politely, because Ming Fan squawks like a chicken being stepped on. But Heng He simply moves towards the door and peeks his head out, hand resting against the door. He does it so easily. If Ning Yingying hadn’t said he was bitten during the invasion, Shen Yuan never would have guessed.

He wishes *he* could raise his arms without trouble, that he could scratch at where his skin itches, the bandages and splints far from comfortable. That he could braid Binghe’s hair and pet Soot’s weird little snoot.

Instead he sits in bed, Binghe briefly pressing closer to move the pangolin back into his lap as the animal almost slides off again. It’s nice. It’s reassuring, and Shen Yuan wishes, just a little, that he could give Binghe’s hand a squeeze.

Zhu Kang steps into the room, and then Lin Jie scrambles past him. The boy is half-hunched and walks a wide circle around them. As Shen Yuan watches him cautiously move through the small room, he can’t help but remember tiny, feral kittens. The ones that puff up and look as big and scary as they possibly can, but end up doing the complete opposite as they spit and hiss.

The boy doesn’t crawl into his lap like Chen Xiaoling. He does not flop onto the bed like

Ning Yingying, nor does he get close enough to hover and loom like Ming Fan. He doesn't even say *hi,* and Shen Yuan sighs, nudges Binghe into taking Soot off of his lap.

A pangolin is probably harder to kill than a pet bird, but he isn't taking any chances.

"Lin-shidi," he greets, and the boy stops and stares, further shrinking into himself. Shen Yuan offers a smile, wishing and wishing he could wave, do something except just *sit there,* "this one is relieved to see that Lin-shidi is doing well. Would he like to come closer?"

The boy's eyes narrow; he glares at Binghe.
Binghe glares back.

"No," Lin Jie says, even as he inches a little bit closer, baring his teeth at Binghe in a snarl that Binghe, of course, does not even blink at. Soot snuffles in the protagonist's lap.

"Is Lin-shidi certain?"

"No," the boy huffs, and Shen Yuan nearly laughs.

"This one is pleasantly surprised to see Lin-shidi," he says instead, and looks towards Zhu Kang, "considering the, um. The lack of a sword?"

Zhu Kang offers up a smile. It's not quite as wide as it normally is, and the other boy has concerningly dark circles under his eyes. It makes sense, Shen Yuan supposes. He *is* a head disciple of Qian Cao Peak.

It must be tiring.

"This one was visiting Bai Zhan Peak to ensure there were no injuries in need of tending among the junior disciples," Zhu Kang explains, "Lin-shidi… was very adamant that this one brought him to visit Shen-shidi, as it seems the news had traveled there as well. Of- of what happened on Qiong Ding Peak."

Zhu Kang's hands have bite marks on them. Shen Yuan can guess what *adamant* means, and he winces. At least there seems to be no blood drawn, unless Zhu Kang already healed it.

"Well, as Lin-shidi can see, this one is fine," Shen Yuan says, forcing the cheer into his voice, "only a little hindered. So Lin-shidi need not worry!"

"Shen's hands," the boy says, then grows still, eyes stuck on Shen Yuan's neck. And then he lurches forward, a burst of movement that would have startled Shen Yuan out of bed if not for Binghe body blocking him- and Lin Jie, as his friend puts up a warding arm to prevent the boy from pouncing. Lin Jie runs into the arm, and bounces back from it with a *oomph* sound.

"Careful!" Binghe snaps.

"Shen's neck," Lin Jie says, and oh. The boy always looks pale, but now what little color there was is gone. The pink of his cheeks has drained, and the pale blue eyes are wide.

Shen Yuan wonders what the cuts against his neck look like, to make Lin Jie look so scared.

“It’s fine,” he soothes, and tilts his chin up, to show it off, “see? They are almost healed.”

“I- I want- I don’t-” the boy says, fingers twitching, hands going up then down, and Shen Yuan nudges his friend.

“Let him onto the bed, please?” he says, and Binghe sits stiff and still, his frame nothing but tension. He doesn’t know that Lin Jie never bites anymore. Well, he doesn’t bite *Shen Yuan* anymore. But the boy clearly needs to be closer to calm down, and look, he knows the little guy isn’t exactly the most trustworthy when it comes to impulse but he’s not *cruel.* He’s just- he’s just a little wild, and needs to be treated *with* trust.

“Binghe,” he coaxes, “please?”

Luo Binghe grits his teeth and then sighs. It is a loud sigh, the kind that explodes outwards and which would be very, very rude. But they are all tired in this room, and so some rudeness can be forgiven. And Binghe is never rude without a reason, anyway.

“If you make Yuan’s injuries worse, I’m kicking you out,” Binghe firmly says, and Lin Jie offers a sharp, jerky nod.

The moment Binghe moves away from the bed, Lin Jie scrambles up onto it, and then his fingers press against Shen Yuan’s throat. The touch is barely there, cold fingertips that brush against skin. It still makes him flinch, not prepared for it.

But he lets the boy touch, and focuses on keeping his breathing calm. At least the boy’s hands are clean. That’s a rare occurrence. As Lin Jie inspects his wounds, Shen Yuan uses the opportunity to look over him in return.

For once, the boy isn’t covered in bruises. His hair is still an uneven mess, but it’s a little longer than last time they met. There are scratches here and there on his face- but not worrisome ones. They look more like the kind one gets running through bushes. The lack of bruises is the most important thing.

Maybe Bai Zhan Peak is too busy to let the other disciples bully him. Or maybe Lin Jie isn’t at the bottom anymore.

Either way, it’s a relief.

Eventually, the boy moves away, shuffling further down the bed. He grasps at Shen Yuan’s foot, covered in blankets, and well, alright. That’s fine. Besides, there is a second guest.

Zhu Kang is still standing by the door. The moment their eyes meet, the polite smile on Zhu Kang’s face falters, and–

“Shidi,” Zhu Kang says, voice breaking, “may this one examine Shidi’s injuries?”

Shen Yuan looks at him for a moment. The other boy's shoulders are slumped, and though he is still trying to smile, the corners of his mouth fail to tilt upwards. He looks tired. Almost as tired as Shen Yuan feels, which is pretty fucking tired. Maybe it's not *just* because he is of Qian Cao Peak. Maybe it's something else.

He could point out that Mu Qingfang has already looked him over; he could lie and say that he is using his own qi to speed up the process. He could tell Zhu Kang to not worry, which Shen Yuan has done many times before, when he limped around on crutches and Zhu Kang was a daily companion who laughed and worried anyway.

"Please do," he says instead, and smiles when Zhu Kang walks to his bedside, Binghe silently moving to the side, and then Zhu Kang carefully holds his wrapped hands, the grasp gentle and steady and almost perfectly professional.

Maybe Zhu Kang was worried about his friend.

Shen Yuan feels a little bad, not having realized they *were* friends.

He will do better.

Liu Qingge visits.

Or, well. Liu Mingyan visits, and she brings her brother with her, or something. Shen Yuan honestly doesn't know why she is there, either. Perhaps to check up on Binghe? The invasion *was* the moment that Liu Mingyan first began to pay attention to the protagonist. So perhaps she visited because of that. Perhaps it was to examine her own, stirring feelings of attraction.

She is polite and she speaks to both of them, asking about their health and wondering if there is something they need help with. Her eyes keep wandering between them, in a way that makes him wonder if she is nervous.

Liu Qingge is–

There.

Staring at Lin Jie, who is curled up into a tight ball of nerves at the foot of Shen Yuan's bed, glaring furiously at the Peak Lord. Zhu Kang had to leave to perform his duties, promising to return to take Lin Jie back to Bai Zhan Peak before the evening.

Did Liu Qingge know about Lin Jie before now? Probably not, right? Bai Zhan Peak does not

pick disciples, unlike everyone else. Does Liu Qingge know about *any* of the junior disciples? Is that why he is staring? He sees the blue and white uniform that Lin Jie wears, a swordless disciple clinging to one of Qing Jing Peak?

It does not matter in the end.

Once pleasantries have been exchanged and Liu Mingyan compliments them on their strong friendship before saying farewell, Liu Qingge wordlessly picks Lin Jie up by the scruff. The boy screeches like a banshee, hisses and spits, kicks and bites, and Liu Qingge doesn't even blink. He merely grunts goodbye to Shen Yuan and Binghe, and then he leaves.

Taking his sister and Lin Jie with him.

Shen Yuan and Binghe sit in confused silence.

At least Zhu Kang doesn't have to fly Lin Jie back?

Liu Qingge visited.

Why hasn't-

Why is it that not even…?

He isn't that surprised that Shen Qingqiu hasn't visited, but *surely*–

Every day, the snow outside grows thicker. The thin dust of white quickly becomes layers upon layers of it, looking deceptively soft to the touch. Paths are paved between houses, disciples sweeping them into a semblance of order. It is nice to look at, something to break up the boredom of being stuck in a room without being able to move his damn arms. Binghe, free of stitches as of that morning and mostly healed, is carefully helping Shen Yuan in pulling his hair into something neat, and they most definitely do not giggle when an older disciple slips and eats shit outside.

The door opens, and they both freeze at the sight of green.

Shen Qingqiu looms in the doorway.

For a moment, everything is still. Binghe's hands linger in Shen Yuan's hair, and Shen Yuan's breath catches in his throat, unmoving and silent as he stares at the Lord of Qing Jing Peak.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes narrow.

"Disciple Luo," he says, "leave us."

There is a lurch in Shen Yuan's gut, and he straightens up, mouth opening in protest before he knows it– only to slam it shut at the glare thrown his way. Shen Yuan averts his eyes, and instead finds himself staring at the two swords hanging by Shen Qingqiu's side.

"This disciple," Binghe begins, far braver, only for the snap of a fan to silence him. Slowly, his friend pulls his hands back, his movement stiff as he steps away. He stops there, and Shen Yuan winces when the temperature *drops.*

"Was this Master unclear?" Shen Qingqiu cooly asks.

"No, Shizun."

"Then why is disciple Luo not leaving?"

"This disciple begs Shizun to allow this one to remain."

"No," Shen Qingqiu says, and Shen Yuan peeks at them, just in time to see the fan snapping shut before Shen Qingqiu points it to the door, "now leave. This is a private matter of which disciple Luo need not hear."

Despite the clear warning in Shen Qingqiu's voice, Binghe does not move. Not at *first,* anyway. His lips thin and his dark eyes narrow, and for a moment Shen Yuan thinks his best friend has possibly gone insane enough to actually refuse. Sure, they haven't been apart more than they absolutely *had* to during this week, but it's fine. It's *fine.* He will survive being alone with their Shizun. Binghe shouldn't risk it.

Perhaps Luo Binghe sees that in Shen Yuan's face; when their eyes meet, his friend hesitates, before he gives a reluctant nod.

"Yes, Shizun," Binghe says, and offers a bow, "this one will ask for tea to be brought here."

Shen Qingqiu does not respond. Only once the door closes behind Binghe does he move closer, the soft sound of green and black fabric brushing together the only sound in the room, and Shen Yuan wishes he could at least clench his hands into fists. But, as always, they are stuck as they are.

The man comes to a stop by the bed, and Shen Yuan has to tilt his head back to meet his eyes. Shen Qingqiu stares down at him, face blank.

He looks exactly like he did before he left for the caves. There are no signs of the demon invasion on him. No sign of *anything,* really, except that cold detachment that Shen Yuan had somehow forgotten about.

Silence.

Thick, suffocating silence, settling down around them.

“Can I have my sword back?” he blurts out.

Shen Qingqiu’s blank stare breaks with a blink; then they narrow into green slivers of disapproval, and Shen Yuan winces when the fan smacks against his knee, landing right on a bruise.

“Be respectful,” Shen Qingqiu snaps.

Wow, okay.

“May this one *please* ask for his sword to be returned?”

“No,” the man says, and Shen Yuan bristles, opening his mouth to protest but Shen Qingqiu continues, “disciple Shen can’t even hold a brush, much less a *sword.* There is no reason to return it.”

“It’s- Fu Yue belongs to this disciple, Shizun, and Wei-shizhu *said–”*

“Wei Qingwei’s words mean nothing on Qing Jing Peak,” Shen Qingqiu cuts him off, “disciple Shen would do well to remember this. And as this master has already said, disciple Shen is unable to wield a sword for now.” His lips curl into a sneer. “If you ever could.”

Shen Yuan flinches.

Suddenly, the splints and bandages feel heavier than ever. He’s abruptly more aware of them than he has been since he first woke up after the invasion, and maybe it’s a good thing his qi is still fucked up. Otherwise, sparks would be jumping from his fingers, another sign of- of–

“I tried,” he says, and it sounds weak to his own ears.

“Intent does not matter; results do,” Shen Qingqiu returns.

Shen Yuan chokes on a laugh. It’s not a happy sound.
It is also not an appreciated one.

“Is disciple Shen *laughing* at this master?”

“No,” he says, and when the man’s glare intensifies, Shen Yuan repeats, “no! No, this one is *not* laughing at Shizun, only- that is-” the words fumble in his mouth, because it is not a lie,

but it is not, perhaps, the truth. But the words can't be found, and so Shen Yuan trails off.

Shen Qingqiu scoffs.

The fan snaps open, white with bamboo stalks painted in stark black. It hides his mouth, the man peering down at him in the way one may look down upon a bug, considering whether to step on it or not. Shen Yuan remembers stepping on snails by accident as a child, the wet crunch always making him feel guilty. Though he can't remember which life those memories belong to.

He wonders where the fan he painted is.

Did Shen Qingqiu throw it away?

"Mu Qingfang has informed this master that disciple Shen is healthy enough to return to Qing Jing Peak," Shen Qingqiu says at last, "though considering the lack of mobility, this master questions his Shidi's judgment. Is disciple Shen even capable of feeding himself?"

No. Binghe has helped with that, a horribly embarrassing task that his friend has continuously told him he is fine with. He… he has helped with a lot of things, actually. As many as Binghe has been capable of doing, considering his own injuries. The kind of things that Shen Yuan has actively repressed, thanks. Embarrassing, shameful things that a protagonist should not help with *ever.*

He shrinks back.

"And yet, disciple Shen demands to have a *sword.* Despite the liability he became during the attack. For he is aware that is what he was, correct? If disciple Shen had not been taken *hostage,* this master could have repelled the invading force with little effort."

"It's not my fault I look like *you!"* he protests.

The fan snaps shut; like the crack of a whip.

"Do not," Shen Qingqiu hisses, "take that tone with me."

Shen Yuan bites his lip, choking back all the words that wants to pour out. It's not *fair!* But- but it *was* his fault, too. But he tried to fix it, he *did,* even if Mu Qingfang didn't like how he did it, he still- he tried to fix it! To not be a liability, to not be a weakness, to not be–

He *tried.*

Shen Yuan's eyes burn and he averts his gaze.

Shen Qingqiu stands up straight.

"... once we return, disciple Shen is not to leave Qing Jing Peak without this master's permission," Shen Qingqiu says, voice low and frigid. The implication of *'Which is never'* is

loud and clear, like ice cracking under one's feet. He can't help but hold himself still. As if he will fall into the icy depths below if he dares to even breathe, as if Shen Yuan is not sitting in bed, a warm blanket covering his legs.

"Yes, Shizun," he mumbles, and then he hesitates.

"Speak."

"Will- will Binghe come with-?"

"Disciple Luo will be the one to *assist* you until it is no longer required. Now get up, and let us depart."

Shen Yuan does as told, head kept low.

The flight home is cold, despite Shen Qingqiu's long sleeves shielding him from the worst of it.

Chapter End Notes

MF: so what if Shizun is a bad dad? I've never heard of a GOOD dad. Have you?

LQG: is that a Bai Zhan child? Clutching at Shen Qingqiu's spawn?
LJ: *hisses*
LQG: ..... illegal. Scruffing time.
LJ: *screams like he is being murdered*

Quote from a dear friend of mine that I had to inlude;
"LJ continues to be the dirty stray dog with fleas that SY wants to let up on the couch and no one else wants to even let into the house"

Also I'm making a heart emoji at a certain anon who, I hope, will enjoy this chapter a little more than others due Heng He and Zhu Kang both appearing in it.

Yes hi!! Sorry for the late chapter :D
I was super cool and talented and managed to catch the flu, which is why this chapter is a week late. I'm still recovering, but I feel much better now! Hopefully I will now stop catching every disease ever and be able to continue keeping a steady schedule *thumbs up* this summer has sucked.

This chapter WAS mostly written during said flu, so honestly a lot of the delay was me frantically editing everything to make some kind of sense. But hey, SQQ and SY talked guys :D what a happy time!

FANART!!!!!!!!!!!

yourgaygrandpa returns with Moshang!!! Woo!!!!!!!!!! Look at poor SQH <3 ehehe

teazart drew this angsty piece :D nice! I especially love the cool earring.

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting! I'm sorry I am very bad at replying, but please know I love it all <3

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world is dark outside; the sky black and scattered with stars, the moon a sliver of silver as it begins to rise. If Luo Binghe were to look outside, he would see lanterns bobbing in the wind that howls as it sweeps through the bamboo. There would be the warm glow of patrolling masters, their own lanterns swaying through the rolling hills of Qing Jing Peak as they walk the paths.

Ever since the attack, there have been more patrols. Even now, Shen Qingqiu has left the house to do so himself. It is a daily routine now, the Peak Lord circling the entire Peak once he has finished his tea.

It is something that *itches* at Luo Binghe, the knowledge that the sect is not safe. Not as safe as he had thought- not as shielded from the outside world as he had let himself believe. The fairy tales which his mother told him were not as safe as he had grown up believing, and Luo Binghe feels a bitter sense of deja vu. Another dream to be torn down by the claws of reality, and it is not something that should be a surprise.

Only there is now the knowledge that *demons* were able to push through their defenses, the memory of their laughter and beastly behavior and how, despite their crude words and drooling jaws, they had invaded the most powerful sect in the known world. There is the memory of Shen Yuan's bleeding neck, the way he *screamed* as his hand was crushed–

"Binghe?"

He blinks.

"Yes?" Luo Binghe replies as he puts aside the outer robe, white and green fabric neatly folded into a perfect square. The white gains an amber tint in the candle light. It is soft and clean, not a hint of blood.

"Is something wrong?" Shen Yuan asks, sitting in his bed, wrapped hands resting above the blanket. His face is pale and his eyes are lined with red from exhaustion, and Luo Binghe bites back the suggestion that they share a bed once more.

It is impossible as long as Yuan is injured.

But if they did, perhaps they would sleep through the night. It has become a rare thing, one which Luo Binghe had hoped would change once they returned to Qing Jing Peak. He had hoped that the familiarity of their room would settle them down, ground them in a reality where they are *safe.* This is their third night of unrest.

Luo Binghe considers stealing Soot.

The pangolin had been a comfort; it had helped Shen Yuan, at least, and that is the most important thing. But Soot is back at Wan Jian Peak. Soot is with Peak Lord Wei Qingwei, and there is no reason for the man to visit at Qing Jing Peak. If he is even allowed. Shen Qingqiu–

“Binghe?” Shen Yuan coaxes, and Luo Binghe shakes his head.

“I’m fine,” he says, and rubs at one cheek, feeling the healing lines against his palm. It will not scar, they had told him. Not like Ming Fan’s, whose lips are now forever tugged downwards into a scowl, “I was only lost in thought. Yuan need not worry.”

“That only makes me worry more,” his friend huffs, “is Binghe *certain* there is nothing wrong? He wouldn’t lie?”

“... does Yuan want me to get Soot?”

Shen Yuan blinks.

“Soot?”

“Or Bao,” Binghe suggests, “I could steal Bao.”

Shen Yuan’s lips twitch upwards, the green of his eyes glinting with mirth, and he looks *lovely,* despite how tired he is, how hurt. Tense and tired since everything, but that glint in his eyes still makes Luo Binghe’s heart beat a little harder.

“Binghe is going to steal a whole horse?” Shen Yuan asks, his smile widening, “where would you hide Bao? In the house? Shizun would know.”

“This humble one could manage it,” Luo Binghe says, and Shen Yuan’s smile softens into something deeper that he wants to touch.

“If anyone could, it would be Binghe,” he agrees, and he says it with such certainty that Luo Binghe *knows* he believes it.

He loves him.

“So it is a yes?” he asks, and kneels by Shen Yuan’s bed. He rests his upper body on it, and is rewarded when his friend’s hand raises to just barely brush against his hair, the very tip of Shen Yuan’s fingers bare from the splints trapping them. “Shall this Shidi steal a horse? A pangolin? Perhaps both? Anything for Shixiong.”

“I would pinch you if I could,” his friend threatens, and Luo Binghe tilts his head to give him his sweetest smile, the one that always earned him a treat from the food stalls on the streets. Shen Yuan huffs, and for a moment, all is well.

Shen Yuan’s hand rests upon his head, a steady weight that keeps Luo Binghe trapped where

he is. If he were to shift, Shen Yuan would move it without hesitation.

Luo Binghe does not shift. He merely stays, watching his friend's face as Shen Yuan's eyes grow distant, gazing out the window once more. Is he looking for Shen Qingqiu? Or does he, perhaps, see something else? Like how he looked towards the rainbow bridge, right before it shattered? As if he had known.

Perhaps it was a coincidence.

Perhaps it was not.

"Shizun said I'm not allowed to leave the Peak."

Luo Binghe opens his eyes, not knowing when he closed them. When he looks at Shen Yuan once more, the other boy has lost his smile. Instead his shoulders are slumped, his face morose.

"Until Yuan is healed?" he asks.

Shen Yuan shakes his head.

"He- he said… Shizun said I'm a liability," he says, and Luo Binghe's fingers curl into fists, "and I couldn't even argue against it. Because I am. I'm *useless* compared to everyone else. But I don't- I don't *want* to stay here forever."

"Yuan wants to leave?"

"Not- not the *sect.* I just…" he falters, and Luo Binghe sits up straight, carefully moving Shen Yuan's hand from his hair and back to the boy's lap. He makes sure to meet his friend's eyes.

"Yuan did injure the demon," he points out, the memory of Shen Yuan's mouth stained red from where he had bitten down into the demoness' skin, his eyes wild, and Luo Binghe's shoulder throbs as he remembers how the knife had dug deeper when they fell to the ground, "you're not useless."

Shen Yuan's face twists into something *furious.*

"It doesn't matter if I managed to hurt her," Shen Yuan spits out, "I was still useless! Maybe Shizun *is* right, maybe I should just- just stay here forever. To not get in others' way because I'm- I'm too fucking *weak* to fend for myself!"

The words are awful. They leave Shen Yuan gasping, his eyes glittering with too many emotions, and Luo Binghe stares and stares.

You're not, Luo Binghe wants to say. He should tell him that Shen Yuan is the strongest person he knows, the most beautiful and inspiring person that Luo Binghe has ever met. That none could compare. That Shen Yuan will beat every odds and always succeed.

But he can't.

Every single time they have encountered demons, Shen Yuan has been attacked. Hurt in such a way that he has been injured for *weeks,* months. He nearly lost his leg the first time, and now he nearly lost his hands. His *life.* Luo Binghe always managed to get there in time to ensure he lived, but it was still too late. It was always *after* Shen Yuan's screams of pain imprinted themselves into his brain.

Luo Binghe does not agree with Shen Qingqiu. The man is far too cruel, aiming his sharp words at every soft spot which Shen Yuan bares in an attempt to be acknowledged, always seeking a relation to the man who continues to *reject him* and–

Shen Yuan is not a liability. He is not useless.

But would it be so bad?

To keep him safe?

He looks at his friend, at how furious and angry and *sad* he is, and Luo Binghe's heart aches. He gets up and he sits on the bed, and he cups Shen Yuan's face in his hands, feeling how the other boy shivers under it. His face is warm to the touch, a flush of shame painting his cheeks. His breathing is heavy, seeming so loud in the small room that they share, a thread fraying at the ends.

Luo Binghe leans in until their brows touch.

"If Yuan wants to leave the sect, to see the outside world- then I'll be with him. Always," Luo Binghe quietly promises, "if Yuan feels weak, then this Binghe will protect him. *Always.* I won't let anyone trap you."

Shen Yuan's breath hitches.

"Really?"

"Really."

Shen Yuan tries to raise his arms, but he can't get the angle right. That is fine. Luo Binghe is happy to hug him instead, letting the other hide his face against his neck. Shen Yuan shudders, and Luo Binghe clings on tight and for a long moment it is just *them.*

There is the faint sound of the front door opening.

Shen Qingqiu has returned.

Slowly, Shen Yuan pulls away. His eyes are lined with red, but no tears have fallen. His smile is a trembling thing, but it is *there.* Luo Binghe smiles back, heart still aching like a tender bruise.

It is fine.

They will be fine. He will make sure of it.

Sleep does not come easy. He hears how Shen Yuan fidgets in the dark, and he once more wonders if he should push their beds together, to brave the disapproval of Shen Qingqiu or not.

But sleep does eventually arrive.

Luo Binghe blinks, and he sits under their tree.

The air is warm and the leaves offer a comforting shade, the crown thick with such intense green that it nearly glows. Luo Binghe looks up towards it, at how the leaves sway in the wind. It is their tree, comfort distilled into something physical. The roots are thick and make the ground around it bumpy as they twist and turn, dipping through the earth like serpents at sea. It is familiar and good, and the only thing missing is Shen Yuan.

But is it the season for green summer leaves?

Luo Binghe's gaze sweeps across the landscape all around, an unending stretch of land, deep cracks marring the earth where the grass does not grow.

The sun is a hazy glimmer, barely visible, and something is *wrong.*

In the distance, Luo Binghe sees a flash of green and white, robes fluttering in the wind, and he pushes himself to his feet.

He runs.

Shen Yuan is asleep until he's not.

For a moment, he stares out at nothingness. Except it's not *nothing,* but rather an endless

wasteland. He stares as clouds shatter into fragments before they reform into new shapes; he stares as cracks appear in the earth, terrifyingly silent, before they writhe and roil and melt away. He watches, and it takes seemingly forever before he figures it out.

"What," he slowly says, "the fuck."

So apparently Binghe and Ning Yingying had *not* met Meng Mo.

Because that is what this must be, surely. It could be nothing *else.* It's not like Sha Hualing would have any reason to throw Meng Mo at Shen Yuan, after all. Not at the weak and pathetic hostage- not when Binghe was right there, kicking ass. Sha Hualing didn't do *weak.* And also, Shen Yuan would never, ever steal a wife. Not that- well, not that he wants her to be a wife. Honestly, he might actually protest that one, plot be damned. Surely Binghe will listen.

But *why* is he in the dream realm?

"System?" he reluctantly calls out as he gets up onto his feet, and oh, how lovely. His hands are fine here. He wiggles his fingers just because he can, and inhales. Exhales. If his eyes sting, no they don't. And even if they did, that's *fine.* Anyone would get emotional about *finger wiggles.* "Is- are you even here?"

(The System provides you with 24-hour service!)

Shen Yuan wishes it didn't. But it's there, at least, which means… Binghe must be somewhere, too. He looks around, a slow spin as he takes in the never ending *strangeness* all around. It's just like in the book. Empty and unending, some things looking uncomfortably realistic in a distinctly *off* way, and others like a child went crazy with markers. It's chaotic. Chaotic and empty, full of everything and yet absolutely nothing and it makes him feel nauseous, trying to make sense of it.

But there is a tree.

Their tree.

Shen Yuan stops and *stares.*

It's- it's much bigger than their tree, but it's still very much theirs. It looks beautiful in the mess all around, the crown gleaming like emeralds. An oasis of normalcy, and Shen Yuan takes a step towards it.

"It's- it's the dream realm, right?" he asks, just to be sure.

(User is correct: We are in a dream realm.)

One step, two steps. He can't get *closer.* The tree remains at the exact same distance no matter how many steps he takes. Shen Yuan stops, at a loss, and above him a cloud flutters like curtains before it reshapes into a rumbling dark gray. Shen Yuan bites his lips and

bunches up the sleeves in his hands, vaguely grateful it is the white of Qing Jing's disciple uniform that greets him, and not… *those* clothes.

Is he stuck where he is? Or is it the tree that can't be approached? Is- is the scenario already happening, and Binghe and Ning Yingying are busy doing the quest while Shen Yuan is *stuck?*

And then Binghe stands up by the tree, just far away enough that Shen Yuan can't see his face, but he *knows* that fluffy hair, the way the boy stands and runs and–

Shen Yuan is running before he knows it, dust kicking up behind him, the world lurching forwards and then Binghe is *there,* their hug breathtaking from the impact as they reach each other before they expect it. Shen Yuan squawks as he knocks them over, Binghe making a squeak of a sound as they fall.

For a stunned moment, they just lie there.

Then Shen Yuan props himself up, hoping he didn't, like, *crush* Binghe. Can he do that in the dream realm? You can *hurt* people in it, so–

"Are you alright?" he asks, hands on either side of Binghe's head, sparing only a brief moment to push his hair back so that it will stop dangling in his friend's face.

Binghe stares up at him with a dazed expression.

Did he hit his head?

"Binghe?" he asks, worried now, and Binghe blinks.

"Yes! Yes, I'm fine," he hurries to say, and Shen Yuan sits back so that his friend can sit up. A pause, and he decides to just get up, actually, because it- well- he can't sit in Binghe's *lap.* And it also lets him help Binghe back up on his own feet, so it's a win-win.

"Binghe is sure?"

"Yes," Binghe says, and then, "your hands! Yuan's hands- they're fine!"

"Oh, yeah," Shen Yuan says, and then laughs despite himself when Binghe grabs both of them, holding them up to his face to inspect them, "I think we are in a dream? I mean, obviously we are, just." He clears his throat, and…

Shit, how does he explain this?

What is logical for him to *know?* Shen Yuan has read so many books in this world, yes, but he can't remember ever reading one on dream demons. Dreams, yes. But not dream demons, not dream realms. Would Binghe know that? Could Shen Yuan get away with lying? He needed to make sure that the protagonist didn't hurt himself, after all, especially considering how many times he and Ning Yingying–

Wait, why the fuck was Shen Yuan even *here?*

Where was Ning Yingying?

“This might be the work of a dream demon,” he says, and gives Binghe’s hands a squeeze each to make the other boy look at him, “I have never heard of a righteous cultivator manipulating dreams before, and we are still somewhere… safe. So it can’t be a demonic cultivator either.”

They were literally in Shen Qingqiu’s house. The man was a mean bitch, but he wouldn’t let some random evil guy break in just to fuck them over. They- Shen Yuan wasn’t *happy* with him, but he knew that Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t allow that. And yeah, okay, Shen Yuan *was* talking out of his ass, but also he was *kiiiinda* sure that demonic cultivators had to, like, touch the person they wanted to mentally torture?

Binghe’s face darkens, and he looks out towards the endless wasteland.

“The ways of demons are truly poisonous.”

“Not all demons,” Shen Yuan says, “we have just… run into bad ones, that is all! Not all of them are poisonous.” Technically, *none* of the ones they had met were. Nor venomous. Obviously he knew that wasn’t what Binghe meant, but, well. His friend is giving him one of those *looks* again. It’s too similar to the ones Shen Qingqiu gives him, whenever he catches Shen Yuan reading about demons. He hates that look. Shen Yuan braces himself, ready to defend his stance.

“If it is the work of demons,” Binghe says instead of anything else, “then how do we defeat it, in a dream? Can we see it?”

Shen Yuan blinks.

“... maybe we should keep walking for now?” he suggests, “surely something will show up. Binghe’s dream realm can’t just be a tree.”

“My dream realm?”

Oh shit.

“It has to be Binghe’s,” he argues as they begin to walk, hand in hand, dust scattering around their feet for each step they take, “I tried to get to our tree, but I couldn’t move anywhere at all, while Binghe could run without struggle. So it must be yours!”

“... *our* tree, Yuan?”

He huffs.

“Isn’t it?”

Binghe smiles, opening his lips to tease, no doubt, but then he looks at the wasteland all around them, the roiling earth and the cracks that open like gaping wounds. His face falls. They may not have studied the dream realm, but they have been told about it. How it is the reflection of one's inner self.

Shen Yuan can't tell him this one is improved. That in the original, there was no tree. Only horrors. Still, Binghe's face makes his heart ache.

"Which is not bad," he hurries to say before his friend can become too dejected, "the demon must have made it like this, surely. And I'm here! This will be an interesting experience. Though, that would mean A-Ying should be somewhere around here as well, shouldn't it?"

The dejected look on Binghe's face turns into a confused one; Shen Yuan will take it. A confused Binghe is far better than a sad Binghe.

"Why would Shijie be here?" He frowns. "Why is *Yuan* here, if this is my dream?"

Don't ask me that! I don't know *why I'm here, Binghe!!!*

"It makes no sense for only me to be here," he bullshits, "my theory is that when the dream demon attacked, your subconscious must have grabbed allies you trusted or- or something like that. Someone *safe.* And A-Ying is your friend as well, isn't she?"

And his future wife. How would this scenario go, if they didn't have the wife to sooth the mental wounds of Binghe's psyche? Shen Yuan was… he wasn't *good enough* for that. He may have his hands in this dream, but that didn't mean much. Not truly. He was still weak, still a liability. With their luck, he would simply implode or get his brain melted by Meng Mo once they found the demon.

He couldn't be the guiding light which Binghe would need in this scenario.

"Shijie is my friend," Binghe agrees, his dark gaze steady when their eyes meet, "but Yuan is the one I trust the most. If Yuan is right, then of course it is only you that will be here. Not Shijie."

Oh.

Shen Yuan's heart thumps in his chest. Binghe looks away, cheeks pink, but he is not the only one. Shen Yuan's face *burns.* His lips twitch, and he has to bite back what can only be a smile. He shouldn't- it is not right, that he is Binghe's most trusted companion. It isn't. He should fix it.

Except he feels warm inside from it. Knowing that yes, he may not be *useful,* not truly. He will not become the badass companion he had hoped for, nor even a good wingman. But this? He can do this.

He can be *trusted.*

They don't talk more after that. The silence has weight to it, one that neither of them dare to break. But they continue to walk while holding hands, and soon that silence settles into something familiar.

They crest a hill, and fog spills forth like a rolling wave, so thick and strange that they brace themselves. But it does not knock them down; instead, once it dissipates, they see a city before them. It is long and winding, like a snake that follows the Luo river, and they stop to stare at it, because this is a city they both know.

Chang Ze.

He remembers Binghe telling him that it had been the city in which his mother found him, the one they lived in before they moved closer to Cang Qiong Mountain. And he- he *knows* what dream they will find within it. But as they stare at it, all Shen Yuan can remember is the demon.

The one that looked like Lady Jia.

For a moment, Shen Yuan considers turning back.

"It's new," he says instead, forcing cheer into his voice before he tugs Binghe along, down the hill and up to the city gates, "so we must be going in the right direction." The gates open, no guards in sight, and the blue window of the System pops up.

(System Alert: You are now entering an important subplot scenario. "The 'Dream Demon' Meng Mo's Barrier." During this subplot, please make sure to assist Luo Binghe in defeating Meng Mo's illusion. Otherwise, one thousand satisfaction points will be deducted.)

What the fuck? That wasn't *fair!*

(User may supplement with F-points, but please remember that F-points are worth half as much.)

Stupid fucking System!

"Yuan-" Binghe begins, only to cut himself off as the gates close behind them, leaving them both to stare at the city.

Everything looks *real,* every building, the paths of the city, the carts rolling down the streets, the way curtains flutter in the air. But the humans; every single face they see is a blurry mass, smooth in appearance, not a hint of a nose or chin. There is simply nothing.

And everything is so *quiet.*

Shen Yuan doesn't know which is the worst part. The faceless people send shivers down his spine, yes, but the quietness… seeing things move that should make *sounds.* People gesturing

at each other, customers and vendors bargaining except there is no fucking *sound.*

They press closer, enough so that it's difficult to walk, but walk they do. Keeping a wary eye on the faceless crowd all around them.

"Why don't they have faces?" Binghe asks, voice hushed.

"I read that no one can make real faces inside dreams," Shen Yuan whispers back as they try to not touch anything, inching to the sidelines of the streets, "but- but something this *detailed,* the demon must be more powerful than I thought, maybe even- Binghe?"

He comes to an abrupt stop, tugged back as Binghe freezes in his tracks. The other boy stares off into an alley, and Shen Yuan tries to see what he is looking at.

"Faces," Binghe says, and then they're off, running after, weaving through crowds and alleyways until at last they come to a stop.

The children they followed have as well; there are four of them, and they are kicking at a sad lump. Shen Yuan knows what he will see before he even looks- *who* it is.

It still hurts.

There is a tiny Binghe, looking no more than four or five years old. He is curled up, miserable and trying to protect his face, even though Shen Yuan can already see blood dripping from it. The children are calling him mongrel, beast, jeering and mocking him with how they will beat him to death and–

Binghe's nails dig into Shen Yuan's palm, hard enough that Shen Yuan snaps out of it. He turns, and tries to block the sight of the abuse, stepping in front of it.

"It's not real," he says, and grabs Binghe's other hand as well, squeezing until his friend's eyes meet his. They are wide, his face pale, and Ning Yingying isn't here to comfort but Shen Yuan *is.*

"It's not real," he repeats, "it's just a dream, Binghe. I'm here."

His friend swallows and gives a shaky nod, and Shen Yuan has half a second to be happy that he managed to pull Binghe out of the despair so quickly. Then the world twists and turns around them, and he abruptly remembers that this didn't end with just *one* scene of misery.

They find themselves in a hut.

It is small and broken down, with gaps in the walls that let the cold wind slip inside. The ground is made of hard-packed dirt, layered with straw that rustle under their feet. It's so *small,* with only just enough space for a bed, a small bench and a little table that wobbles with uneven legs. The only light inside the hut comes from the oil lamp that flutters weakly on top of it, about to run out of fuel.

On the bed lies a woman. She is old and weak, her arms trembling as she tries again and again to sit up, never quite succeeding. Her face is kind but haggard, her cheeks shallow and the lines on her face run deep. She shouldn't be in such a cold, dreary place.

Shen Yuan can't help but take a step closer, one hand reaching out to help her sit up. Only Binghe's iron grasp on him stops him from doing so, because once again Binghe has been turned into a frozen statue, staring with too wide eyes at the old woman before them.

A younger Binghe rushes inside; he looks like he is ten years old now, skinny but still healthier than his mother. Shen Yuan sees the jade guanyin pendant dangling from his neck and *oh.* Of course, how did he forget this? Binghe's mom's health declined after she bought it, so this means…

He glances towards his friend, and sees how Binghe clutches at the pendant hanging from his own neck, knuckles turning white.

"Mother, why are you getting up again?" the little Binghe before them asks anxiously, "didn't we say it's fine to rest?"

The old woman coughs, the kind that rattles one's bones, and she protests as Binghe insists, until she gives in and lays back down. Shen Yuan watches as Binghe- so *small,* to imagine they were once both so tiny- bows his head to let his mother pet it, and they listen as he promises to bring her congee and *damn it,* Airplane. Did he really have to make Binghe's early life so miserable?

Little Binghe rushes off to get congee.
The light dims, and the woman's breathing slows.

When Binghe is the one to step forward this time, Shen Yuan has to be the one to tug him back even as he wants to let him go. But he can't. They can't.

The hut falls into darkness, and once again everything around them shifts. Like a stuttering reel of old film and yet far too realistic to be anything but *real,* scenes are shown to them.

Little Binghe begging for congee, only to be ridiculed. Binghe crying over his mother's body, and the miserable scene of him trying to bury her all alone, face lined with dirt and tears as he dug a hole. Binghe wandering the streets in misery, Binghe braving the wilds in threadbare clothes. And then–

Shen Yuan somehow didn't expect to see himself in this showcase of misery. But there he is, bruises blooming across his body, him and Binghe being shoved down the stairs by the older disciples, both of them being put through backbreaking chores that grows more difficult as time passes. Binghe hugging him as they both tremble, Binghe digging him out of the snow after Zhao De buried him in it, Binghe going to Shen Qingqiu, asking for *help* and being told– being–

They stand in an alleyway and a demon tears into his leg, and Shen Yuan's own screams echo through the otherwise silent world as Binghe throws himself forward. Then Sha Hualing's

knife is against his throat and suddenly Shen Yuan is far too aware of how quiet and tense *his* Binghe is, the real one holding his hand.

When he looks at his friend, Binghe's breathing is harsh and uneven, spiritual energy gathering around him, making their clothes flutter in it. Shen Yuan stares as Binghe's eyes shift towards an unnatural red and then Binghe raises one hand, his palm glowing as he aims a spiritual blast at the crowd of demons and humans alike, jeering and mocking and hurting both of them and if he hurts the illusions he will–

Shen Yuan doesn't think.

The blast hits him with the force of a truck trying to make you go isekai, knocking the air out of his lungs. He can't even *scream.* Instead he crumples to the ground, gasping, face wet with tears from the pain and *fuck,* holy shit, *why was Binghe so strong!?* Fuck it *hurts,* it hurts so much.

Above, Binghe startles, staring first at Shen Yuan, and then down at his own hand, spiritual light still visible within his veins. Once the other boy realizes what happened, he cries out and falls to his knees, tugging Shen Yuan close.

"Yuan!" he cries, hugging him, "I'm sorry! Why did- why did you- how could I–? Why didn't you hit *back!?"*

"Hurts," Shen Yuan gasps, clutching at Binghe's chest, and his friend's face twists with self-loathing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"No," and Shen Yuan coughs, feeling miserable but he keeps going, "not me! You, you can't- you can't hurt people in here! It, it will hurt *you,* Binghe. I'm fine, I'm fine."

"It's better than hurting *you,"* Binghe argues, and Shen Yuan doesn't even mind as Binghe pushes his hair back, to wipe at the tears running down Shen Yuan's face, "I know you could have hit back, you should have! What- what do I do? How do I heal you?"

It's just a dream, Shen Yuan thinks, it's *fine.*

"I'm fine," he says out loud.

"You're not! It's all my fault…"

"It's not! It's not," he protests, and when Binghe clearly does not believe him, Shen Yuan huffs, chest aching, ribs straining but it's *fine,* "it is the demon's fault. It's not Binghe's fault that he isn't strong enough to resist it, not yet. But you will be, in the future. I'm sure of it! That does not mean it's your fault for- for being unprepared."

Luo Binghe doesn't look reassured.

“I should be strong *now,”* his friend says, and the words hit too close to home, something about them making Shen Yuan’s chest twinge.

He shoves it aside.

Instead Shen Yuan clumsily pats at Binghe’s head in retaliation, because it seems easier than to argue back. Then he blinks, confused as he takes in their surroundings. Gone is Chang Ze city, gone is Qiong Ding’s plaza with its bloodied and cracked tiles, and gone are the crowds of people; instead they are surrounded by a forest, the sky a dark midnight blue with the moon hanging above them, golden rather than silver, full instead of a crescent. There are no stars except for the ones that shimmer in Binghe’s eyes, tears yet to be shed.

“Where the fuck are we?” Shen Yuan blurts out, and for a moment Binghe looks ready to forget everything in favor of shock at Shen Yuan’s crudeness. As if it’s new, as if he has never heard Shen Yuan curse before. However, Binghe still looks around, and he too appears confused.

“I don’t remember this,” he says, “I- I don’t know where this is.”

They fall silent, staring into the dark woods.

“Help me up?” Shen Yuan finally suggests, and together they stand, unsteady but stubborn. The forest remains dark and quiet.

“You’re quite something, to actually break through this elder’s barriers, boy.”

The voice comes out of nowhere. Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe both tense, eyes searching, but neither can find where it came from. It is a hoarse voice, and old. Shen Yuan would compare it to a chain smoker of fifty years if he could.

“Are you the demon?” Binghe asks, his grasp on Shen Yuan tightening, “why have you trapped us here? Let us go!”

Hey, that’s not part of the script!

Shen Yuan is very aware of the fact that Meng Mo can fry their brains if he chooses to. Binghe may have the protagonist halo, but as shown, Shen Yuan does not have the same privilege. He tugs on his friend.

“Binghe,” he whispers, “don’t make him angry.”

Meng Mo chuckles, the sound echoing all around them, an eerie contrast to the silence that has yet to lift. There is an oddness to it, the voice sounding like ripples in a pond.

“Come over here and let this elder see what kind of young hero is capable of undoing this elder’s work,” he says, “and perhaps this elder shall answer your question, boy.”

Binghe’s eyes narrow.

Shen Yuan wonders what he can say. What is his role in this scenario? He isn't supposed to know who Meng Mo is. He isn't the childhood sweetheart, there to hide and cry and offer sweet encouragement. Hell, he isn't even a cool master, there to guide and offer knowledge.

"Maybe we should do as he says," Shen Yuan suggests, willing Binghe to stay calm and rational, even if his body still aches from the spiritual blast from before. Even now, he struggles to stand up straight. "What else can we do, Binghe?"

"Yuan was hurt because of this demon," Binghe says, eyes sharp as they dart around, like swords aiming for the vitals, "and now they hide? This one did not break through your barriers," he calls out, "the credit does not belong to me!"

Except it did; Shen Yuan may have been hit by the blast, successfully taking the threat of Binghe mutilating his own mind. But only Binghe, the owner of this dream, could actually break the barrier which had kept them trapped in those nightmares.

Not that Shen Yuan is supposed to know that.

"Hm," Meng Mo harrumphs, "this elder still wants you to come over, boy, but I don't want this human child from Cang Qiong Mountain to hear our conversation. I'll have him sleep first."

Oh, scene change! That was good!

A headache assaults him, except it hurts far too much to simply be a headache. Shen Yuan gasps, and then he falls. Binghe only barely manages to catch him, cradling him in his arms.

By then, Shen Yuan is unconscious.

He sits in a palanquin.

Shen Yuan doesn't know how he knows that. It hardly sways as the carriers walk forward in perfect sync, the curtains hiding him from view fluttering. Shen Yuan sits and stares down at his lap, smoothing one hand over the red fabric. He traces the golden patterns in it, and he wonders what they are. Sitting like this, in the dim darkness of the palanquin, it is impossible to tell.

The palanquin comes to a stop, and Shen Yuan's heart flutters as it sinks down. When he steps outside, it is difficult to contain a joyful smile, near impossible to keep it dignified at all. If it was not improper, he would be running down the end of the path, right into his–

Wait.

Why the fuck is he so excited?

Shen Yuan falters in his steps, but the crowd of cheering demons all around him doesn't seem to notice. He stares out at them, eyes wide, and then he looks back down at his clothes. Now standing, he can see that the gold patterns form into phoenixes and dragons, weaving in a dance. Royal and dignified, and the red- it's–

Is he wearing *wedding robes!?*

Not only that, but feminine ones!

Wife ones.

Shen Yuan gapes down at himself, mind whirling, and then there is a gentle nudge to his back- from where? Who??? - and he continues to walk forward, mind blank from confusion.

Far off in the distance, so far away it can only be a dream, he can see the silhouette of the person waiting for him. They stand tall and proud, and even though Shen Yuan has no idea what is going on, the sight makes his heart beat a little faster. Not out of excitement or whatever! It's just- he *knows* that silhouette, even if it is now an adult.

It's Binghe.

Luo Binghe is waiting for him, dressed in wedding red. As Shen Yuan gets closer, he can see that Binghe's shoulders are wider. There is a glowing mark on his brow, and Shen Yuan's breath catches in his throat as their eyes meet.

Binghe smiles, pure joy and adoration, and Shen Yuan smiles back, unable to resist, closer and closer, hands reaching out, and Binghe tugs him closer, hands warm as they catch Shen Yuan's. All Shen Yuan can see is Binghe's dark eyes filled with stars as the protagonist leans in, and it's not proper, kissing like this, but Shen Yuan doesn't care. He leans in as well, arms around Binghe's neck as he—

Wakes up.

Shen Yuan sits upright in bed, staring into the darkness.

What the *fuck?* He didn't even get to kiss his *husband!?* What a shitty dream! Meng Mo could do better–!

He stills.

Wait.

Why would he want to kiss Binghe?

Chapter End Notes

SQQ, prowling: I'm not going to let any demon filth get past me, the child has enough trouble staying alive, those damn rakes, why does he keep stepping on them-
Meanwhile
MM, watching these two idiots in the dream: ah, alright, got it! Childhood sweethearts. I can use this. I'll make the best dream, really push for it so that this Luo-brat will become grateful for my interference! That will make him respect me!
SY, sweating: WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT

hi guys!!! Guess who is on vacation and briefly forgot it was monday??? not me, surely not.

This chapter was a bit of a challenge to write! I couldn't very well skip the dream scene, but there is only so much that I can change up when it's also Meng Mo's first appearance. Hopefully it was still fun to read ^^

WE HAVE FANART!!!!

kyusoob made this adorable art of BingYuan! Binghe loves his friend so much <3

yourgaygrandpa returns with art of Ning Yingying! Ahh!!!

elian-does-art also drew Ning Yingying, is this NYY appreciation week?? The poses <3

theimpurelily has ALSO made art, this time a small comic of NYY being a menace :D

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Qingqiu detests meetings.

There is rarely anything worthwhile to discuss; *some of them* are capable of handling their own peaks without the interference of others, and so the gathering is a waste of time for those capable of performing their duties. It is a waste now more than ever; winter has arrived with ice cold gales and thick, cumbersome snow and Qiong Ding Peak still does not have enough dormitories to house their own disciples.

And so each meeting is split in two with indecision, piled up when they could spend their time on more *useful* things than idiotic squabbling. Some wish to pursue the demons still, despite a previous agreement to stay back for now, their defenses too weak to risk such an endeavor.

Some skulls are simply too thick to get through, Shen Qingqiu knows, but he had expected at the very least Qi Qingqi to show some common sense. Instead she has joined the rabid pack that demands vengeance.

Yue Qingyuan's insufferable smile has begun to strain at the edges, each meeting tugging at the fraying threads of it.

Shen Qingqiu's headache grows worse upon seeing it. Typical.

The meeting ends, and Shen Qingqiu sneers from behind his fan, watching as some of his sect siblings leave with too heavy steps, their faces twisted into scowls. Childish, like toddlers stomping their feet in protest. The person Shen Qingqiu wants to see the least is, of course, the brute who lingers by the doorway, eyes seeking him.

Shen Qingqiu turns his gaze away and walks towards his target, far away from Liu Qingge. He does not acknowledge Yue Qingyuan who follows behind him, a mere step short of being respectful but at least he is quiet. He has been more quiet than usual these past weeks.

He has not visited Qing Jing Peak since the child returned.

"Mu-shidi," Shen Qingqiu says as he comes to a stop.

"Shen-shixiong," Mu Qingfang greets in turn, still gathering the numerous scrolls which he had brought. Wei Qingwei stands beside him, dutifully accepting many scrolls of his own from the healer.

When there had been no arguing, most talks had centered on Qiong Ding's reparations and Qian Cao Peak's needs. Neither of which Qing Jing Peak has much to do with.

The most they have been able to offer is space for the younger disciples. Qing Jing Peak has never been the peak which fills their dormitories to the brink, and so there was space available. Better to offer it than to let someone accuse him of being unfilial.

“Is all well? Shen-shizhi is healing as he should?”

“Yes,” Shen Qingqiu says, “however, the disciple whom Shidi sent to oversee the child’s progress is no longer welcome. This one believes it would be better that Shidi attends.”

Mu Qingfang raises one brow, tucking the last scroll away.

“Has disciple Zhu caused trouble?”

Not yet.

The boy had appeared dutiful upon his arrival, exhibiting respect. He had not touched anything he was not allowed to touch, and he had been gentle when he examined Shen Yuan’s health.

Too gentle, with eyes that stared too long and hands which lingered for longer than was to be accepted. *Familiar* in how he and the child spoke to each other, warm fondness that so obviously hid the disgusting desire for something *more.* Shen Yuan had been a foolishly oblivious little *idiot,* of course, blind to the advances that were glaringly obvious to anyone with *eyes.*

Shen Qingqiu scoffs from behind his fan, and the room is empty of all but the four of them, Yue Qingyuan a steady presence behind. And there is Liu Qingge, still skulking by the entrance. Like mold.

“He gazes upon disciple Shen with… *coveting eyes,”* Shen Qingqiu says, slowly, unwilling to part with the information. But Mu Qingfang must be warned. Perhaps Zhu Kang covets others than Shen Yuan. Perhaps the boy is a future stain on Mu Qingfang’s reputation, a healer who will take advantage of those too weak to stop his advances.

“Ah,” Mu Qingfang says, voice mild, and Shen Qingqiu tenses upon seeing the lack of surprise, “this one knows of what Shixiong speaks of. However, this one can assure Shixiong that disciple Zhu would do nothing without consent. And if Shixiong disapproves of such attention, he should be made aware–”

“Xiao-Shen is the sect’s little heartbreaker,” Wei Qingwei breaks in.

The temperature in the room plummets.

Mu Qingfang sighs.

“Wei-shixiong,” he scolds, but Wei Qingwei appears frustratingly unbothered, dimples visible as he grins.

“Mu-shidi,” he lovingly returns, then aims that idiotic grin at Shen Qingqiu instead as he continues, “but truly, Shen-shixiong. It is quite entertaining! Watching all the boys fall all over themselves around your little protegee.”

The fan cracks in his hand. He snaps it shut.

“There are. More?” he grits out.

“Oh, this one believes every peak that has male disciples now also has at least one disciple who carries a torch for Xiao-Shen.”

Filth.

He whirls around and stabs the fan against Yue Qingyuan’s chest.

“What of Qiong Ding?” he hisses.

Yue Qingyuan blinks down at him, surprise visible in the wideness of his eyes, the way one hand raised half-way before it sank back down. He is pale, with the hint of dark circles under his eyes. Shen Qingqiu stabs him again when he is too slow to respond.

“Ah- no, there have been no courting attempts as far as this one is aware, Xiao– Shidi,” he finally replies, stumbling on his words.

“As if they would be so *obvious* and *honorable* as to openly declare such a thing,” Shen Qingqiu sneers, “the fact that they were waiting until this one was in seclusion before they decided to behave like *pigs* is proof enough.”

“Perhaps Shen-shixiong should return Xiao-Shen’s sword,” Wei Qingwei says, and Shen Qingqiu’s gaze snaps back to him, “so that he may ward off any unwanted advances, if Shixiong worries so for him.” The words are said with cheer, a helpful suggestion, clearly a mockery of sincerity. The question is too *pointed* to be anything but a direct attack.

Shen Qingqiu rests his hand upon Xiu Ya, cold and certain against his palm. One finger brushes against Fu Yue which lays nestled against it. The sword’s soul is distant, unwilling to show a glimmer of itself. Shen Yuan remains on Qing Jing Peak, both hands wrapped and useless.

“What use would it be? The child can’t even use his hands, nor his qi,” he snaps back, headache *throbbing.* He should not have remained behind at this meeting. He should have returned to his duties, to ensure that the borders remained intact, that the little brat stayed in the house.

“How is his qi?” Mu Qingfang queries, hitting Wei Qingwei with one scroll, too gentle, against the shoulder, not enough to be a punishment, “it should be recovering now, yes?”

“Did Mu-shidi’s disciple not tell him?”

“This one has not had the time to discuss it,” Mu Qingfang replies, ignoring the acidity in Shen Qingqiu’s voice, “but this one is aware that Shen-shixiong still examines disciple Shen’s meridians every day. He would know better than this one’s disciple.”

Obviously he would know better.

The answer is slow.

The boy’s meridians remain where they should be, torn at the edges but healing each day. His qi, however, is sluggish. Like a blocked off river, it is a mere trickle in comparison to the flood which used to be there. If it grows, it does it so slowly that Shen Qingqiu cannot tell the difference from day to day. Coaxing that river into returning to its former strength is a slow and tedious endeavor, made more so by the boy’s mullish behavior. No doubt he is blaming Shen Qingqiu for all the wrongs in his life, as is typical.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes flick towards Wei Qingwei; to Liu Qingge, who has come closer, chin raised high and brows furrowed into a scowl that makes Shen Qingqiu’s fingers *itch* for a knife.

“They are improving. Slowly,” Shen Qingqiu says at last, turning back towards Mu Qingfang, “but enough now. Shidi is no doubt busy, as is this one.”

With that, he turns around and brushes past Liu Qingge, refusing to acknowledge him. He ignores Wei Qingwei’s laughter at Liu Qingge’s outraged expression and he ignores Mu Qingfang’s sigh and he ignores Yue Qingyuan following close behind, like a dreary shadow of fatigue.

Until they are outside.

“Is Xiao-Yuan doing well?” the man asks as Xiu Ya leaves its sheath, hovering before Shen Qingqiu. The cold winter sun gleams harshly against the edge of it.

Shen Qingqiu glares at him.

“Zhangmen-shixiong should visit to see for himself,” he replies, “this one does not have time to discuss such things.” And perhaps the boy would not *sulk* in such an unbecoming manner, if his precious *gege* visited just once, “indeed,” Shen Qingqiu continues, “this one is surprised he has not visited since the boy’s return to the peak, considering how often Zhangmen-shixiong visited before so.”

Yue Qingyuan looks away.

Pathetic.

“Shen Qingqiu.”

Liu Qingge’s grating voice cuts him off from what he was going to say. Their eyes meet and

once again Shen Qingqiu wonders why he had not let the man die within the Ling Xi caves.

“Liu-shidi,” he cooly replies.

“Hello, Shidi,” Yue Qingyuan says, and Liu Qingge offers a nod, posture less stiff in the face of Yue Qingyuan’s smile. The sight makes the back of Shen Qingqiu’s throat *burn.*

“Zhangmen-shixiong.”

Of course only Yue Qingyuan is worthy of respect. Shen Qingqiu scoffs and steps up onto Xiu Ya, and all around them are thick, gray clouds. The meeting room they use is so high up that one can’t see what is below them. When it drifts closer, it feels cold and wet. Once upon a time, he had thought they were solid. Children truly were so dumb.

“Shen Qingqiu!” Liu Qingge snaps, but it is too late.

Shen Qingqiu dives down below, and snow begins to fall.

“Oh, look. It’s snowing. *Again.”*

Binghe hums, and Shen Yuan huffs. He would flop over if he could, but it would be impossible to get back up from the floor without help. Binghe is in the kitchen, *briefly* allowed to cook Shen Yuan’s food in there, as long as Shen Qingqiu does not need to use the kitchen himself.

Shen Yuan has never seen the man actually *eat* before, so that seems unlikely to ever happen. It was dusty when the man left for seclusion. Shen Qingqiu probably practices inedia, too good for something as plebian as *eating.* Ugh.

Also he’s away at a meeting, so.

Shen Yuan watches as the snow falls outside. The snowflakes are massive, comically so. Like his life. He glances towards the kitchen, hands resting in his lap as he sits and waits. It smells good. Delicious, even, and Shen Yuan’s belly grumbles.

Binghe laughs, cultivator hearing used for evil things such as mocking his best friend’s slow starvation, and Shen Yuan’s cheeks grow warm as he wills his stomach to shut the fuck up. And if his insides flutter at the sound of Binghe’s laugh, well, that’s normal. It’s fine. He’s happy that Binghe is happy. Obviously.

Shen Yuan looks down at his hands, and wonders if Binghe knows.

Not about *that,* but- but about his heritage. The reasonable, logical thing to know about that has nothing to do with weird dreams.

Did Meng Mo tell him? If he has, will Binghe tell *him?* There is no reason not to, is there? Shen Yuan has shown so much support for demons. Too much, even, because Shen Qingqiu has removed every damn book on demons from the bamboo house. That, or Binghe lied and said he did when Shen Yuan asked him to find one on demon culture. Not that Binghe would lie. He's honest and good, always telling Shen Yuan everything.

Except about his demonic heritage.

Though it's only been a few hours. That is an important thing to remember. Hours since they woke up from Meng Mo's introduction. Hours since– *nope.*

It could be because it's Shen Qingqiu's house. But the man is away on that meeting, so- so it's fine. It should be fine to tell Shen Yuan. Binghe can't tell *Ning Yingying* before he tells him! Can he? She is *shit* at keeping secrets, even if she doesn't mean to be. Not even in the original did Luo Binghe tell her anything, not until he came back. That had actually been a very good scene; very forbidden lovers vibe, the protagonist not yet powerful enough to take down the sect, but word of his survival had gotten out and of course Ning Yingying just *had* to meet him to see for herself and…

Shen Yuan pictures the scene, and his hands itch.

Okay, so maybe imagining what's *basically* a sister kissing his best friend is, uh, not good. Like he will be supportive whenever it happens, obviously, both deserve the best in life, but wow. Yikes. That felt *bad.* That was… nope. Nope, nope.

Though maybe Ning Yingying is like a sister to Binghe too, now. Or a friend. Since she wasn't in the dream. Since…

Binghe comes out of the kitchen, holding a tray of steaming hot food. There is fish and rice, pickled vegetables and the tea that apparently encourages qi flow. Shen Yuan looks at Binghe, with his hair tied up, one curly strand falling into his face. His cheeks are flushed from the heat of the kitchen, and his smile is small and pleased, eyes glimmering, and the *way* that smile looks, all secretly pleased, it's- he looks-

"What did he say?" Shen Yuan blurts out.

Binghe blinks at him, kneeling down to put the tray onto the table. Easy and graceful, the simple act looking nothing like a servant's, his hands steadier than Shen Yuan's had ever been at Lady Jia's.

"What did who say?" Binghe asks, plating up their food because Shen Yuan can't. There is only one pair of chopsticks. Days ago, Shen Yuan said they only needed one pair, really, because Binghe already had so much cleaning to do and cooties were fake.

They don't seem very fake now.

Shen Yuan can't think about that. Meng Mo, that's what he's meant to think about. Not cooties. Or indirect kisses. Or–

Shen Qingqiu is at the meeting. It's safe.

"Meng Mo," Shen Yuan says, and Binghe startles, nearly spilling the tea he was pouring, a *splash* where there should be barely any sound at all.

They both glance towards the door of the bamboo house.

It remains closed.

"What of him?" Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan huffs.

"He may have put me to- to *more* sleep, but I still heard he wanted to talk to Binghe alone," he points out, and he doesn't want to be pushy and annoying, obviously, it's just… "he didn't hurt Binghe, did he?"

He didn't in the original.

But the demon invasion showed that nothing in this world is sacred.

(+5 Satisfaction Points!)

"He didn't," Binghe assures him, and he *click, clicks* the chopsticks together three times before he picks up the first bite of food, the way Shen Yuan always does, "he… he just wanted to be a rude old man. Demon." He falters on the word. *Demon,* saying it differently than usual.

Usually there's seething hatred. Now it's… it's not *softer.* It's more like a stumble, a hesitation before doing something. Like when Shen Yuan fucks up a step when training with Fu Yue, overthinking it and fucking it up because of it. But worse, because Binghe isn't meant to be hesitant.

Okay. So Meng Mo *did* tell Binghe, then.

And–

"Did he tell you how he got… here?" Shen Yuan asks, "he's a dream demon, I don't know how they, uh, travel? Like did he just jump through dreams or something?"

Binghe grimaces.

"He was sent here by the demoness who attacked us," he admits, and once more they glance towards the door, ears straining. The wind is howling outside, though. Sending those massive snowflakes into a dizzying dance. Hopefully that means Ning Yingying is staying where she

should, or that Shen Qingqiu will run late. “I’m not sure how or why, as he wouldn’t tell me that. But she is the one who did it, and he said that there is little risk of a second dream demon being sent to us.”

Just like the original.

“Oh, lovely,” Shen Yuan says, and then the food is held up towards him, and he is going to die. He is going to *die,* because he’s *fucked,* he will never get to touch Fu Yue ever again, because he’s *dead.*

“Is Yuan not hungry?” Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan’s face is burning as he opens his mouth, and the fish is crispy and perfectly seasoned, with a bite to it that makes his lips tingle and Shen Yuan can only despair because of course it’s delicious. It’s *always* delicious.

He chews, and then Binghe takes a bite of his own, with the same chopsticks, as if there’s nothing wrong ever at all.

“He didn’t tell Binghe anything else?” Shen Yuan asks, because if Binghe puts those chopsticks to his mouth again, knowing Binghe’s lips touched them, he doesn’t know what he will do. Maybe scream! Maybe die!!!

Except he must have asked it too desperately. Because Binghe stops, lowering his hand to stare at him with his dark, dark eyes. *Studies* him, and Shen Yuan stares back, unable to turn away. He watches as Binghe’s face settles on a conclusion. As if he had a question and just found the answer.

“Yuan,” his friend slowly says, “are you a–”

The door slams open, the howling wind rushes inside and Shen Yuan squawks as Shen Qingqiu slams it closed once more.

They all stare at each other.

Shen Qingqiu has snow in his hair, bright white spots of melting snowflakes that kind of looks like some maniac sprinkled all over him, and there is snow on his shoulders, too. He looks cold. He looks furious.

Wait, what?

“What,” Shen Qingqiu seethes, “are you cretins doing?”

Binghe, the supposedly smart protagonist with insane IQ, straightens his back, makes direct eye contact and smiles.

“Feeding Shixiong,” he says, voice sweet and pressing the next bite to Shen Yuan’s lip. Shen Yuan opens his mouth out of reflex, pickled cucumbers and rice, and then he turns bright red.

Shen Qingqiu explodes.

By the time Shen Qingqiu has calmed down enough to remember that Shen Yuan does in fact need assistance with eating, it's too late.

Their ears are ringing and the food has gone cold.
Shen Yuan can only mourn the loss.

It still tastes good, of course. It *is* Binghe's cooking. Sometimes Shen Yuan thinks that even if one were to throw it out and then scoop it back up again, it would still taste better than anything else. He wonders if worms have reached spiritual enlightenment, eating the leftovers of Binghe's cooking. The rare times it happens. Binghe hates waste.

Shen Qingqiu looms by his desk, making it impossible to talk over dinner. A stifled atmosphere, *horrible* for digestion, as Binghe alternates between feeding himself and feeding Shen Yuan.

(at least there are now two pairs of chopsticks)

History is a fascinating subject.

At times, Shen Yuan's brain shuts off, listening to far too much droning on and on from Master Qian Meilin- too young to be called an elder, too happy to stay at the sect rather than to go out into the *real world, ugh, can they swap?* – but most of the time, it's… interesting. Because this is still China, if broken up and pieced together oddly, with plenty of history that he recognizes, and just as much that he doesn't. And *normally* they focus on not only the sect's history, but human history in general, and all the politics and ties between every sect, big or small.

Lately, they have focused on the history of war.

War with *demons* kind of history.

Shen Yuan sits, Binghe on one side and Ning Yingying on the other. There is no point in separating him and Binghe in the classrooms anymore, after all. Not when he needs his friend's help to do literally anything, the qi in his veins too sluggish to be of much use.

So they sit and they listen as Master Qian tells them of the time Cang Qiong Mountain had to destroy a clan of Flower Demons. He takes great relish in describing the winning strategy they used against the 'inferior beasts' that let the cultivators 'weed them out', and how there had been no signs of such demons ever since. That they had gone extinct, as was only proper, for they had infected whole villages with their pollen.

"A dead demon is a good demon," he says, and the other disciples nod.

Binghe looks small where he sits, diligent as he takes notes, careful to not look up too often. His shoulders are tense and his face pale.

These past days, nearly every teacher has been viciously talking about demons. Sword instructors explain how the organs may be placed differently, so stab here. Calligraphy has been interrupted with sneers at how *uncivilized* the demons are, not known for recording their own history, much less for writing down something as intricate as poetry. Even the damn music teacher has made comments of it, how the only *good* music from demons come from those that rely on seducing humans, that there is no sense of creativity or originality and that–

– and Shen Yuan *gets it,* alright, he does, look at his fucking hands! People died! But the way they all talk is making him feel nauseous and–

Binghe looks small.

Shen Yuan stands up.

"Disciple Shen?" Qian-Bitch-Meilin says, and Shen Yuan smiles with all his teeth, palms itching within their wrappings. Binghe sits very still, watching their teacher carefully. Ning Yingying looks delighted, straightening up from where she had been nodding off. Everyone else turns their heads to stare at him, curious.

"This one wonders what the pollen did?" Shen Yuan asks, "to make it such a big threat that every single one of them had to be murdered."

Qian Meilin wrinkles his nose.

"Killed," he corrects, "one has to be a person to be murdered. Demons are demons, not people."

"Actually," Shen Yuan says, "demons are known to have a very rich culture, each part of the demon realm as varied as the human realm. The spider demon clan of the Southern Crimson Forest are known for weaving their stories with silk in between every branch and this one does believe that the last time silk made of their web was found and sold, even Huan Hua couldn't afford it. Does that not mean–"

"Disciple Shen, sit down."

"But this one wasn't *done,* Master Qian."

“We are discussing the history of past battles, not on *clothes.* If disciple Shen finds the subject interesting, perhaps he should attempt to join Xian Shu Peak, since that is *their* speciality. We are discussing *tactics.”*

“What good are tactics if you underestimate your opponent? Many demons have shown high intelligence, and yet Master Qian speaks as if they are no more clever than simple beasts. Did it not take all four of the great sects to seal away a Heavenly Demon, because he was too smart and tough to kill?”

“Heavenly demons are *not–”*

“What of the Northern Realm? This one has read all about their fascinating traditions. Not that there has been much to read, of course, but not because there is a lack from *them,* only that they are secretive and difficult to approach, but many things point towards a rich knowledge of magic and–”

“This does not have anything to do with–!”

“And if demons are so stupid, then how come they managed to attack us? What does *that* say about our sect? Is Master Qian implying that our sect is stupid? Or is he simply too afraid to even *imagine* that demons are more clever than him, is *that* why he always hides out here instead of going on nighthunts?”

“Disciple Shen!”

Shen Yuan falls quiet. Qian Meilin is breathing heavily, and the room is deathly quiet. Shen Yuan’s eyes are narrowed, slivers of green, face cold and blank even as his glare *burns.*

Binghe’s eyes are wide, staring up at him.

“Disciple Shen,” Qian Meilin says once he has calmed down, though his voice still shakes from anger, “as punishment for speaking out of turn, disciple Shen shall transcribe the first ten pages from the book of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect’s history and then this master expects disciple Shen to repent by running ten laps, narrating what he has transcribed as he runs. Is this understood?”

Shen Yuan stares.

Then, he raises his hands. Wrapped up tightly, splints keeping everything in place. Only his fingertips are visible. He can’t even wiggle them, and so he just holds them up for all to see.

Shen Yuan raises a mocking brow.

“This one is afraid that Mu-shishu would disagree with it.”

Ning Yingying giggles.

Qian Meilin's face turns an ugly red.

"This master has received five reports in two days of disciple Shen's behavior," Shen Qingqiu says without looking up from his work, "a *fascinating* change, considering that disciple Shen has until now been an acceptable student who has earned few complaints."

Shen Yuan looks at him, and thinks about the dream. Of Binghe coming into the house, asking Shen Qingqiu for help, and being utterly denied. He thinks about talks of punishments and squished tangerines, and he wonders again where the fan he painted is.

It's been years since Binghe asked for help.
Shen Yuan isn't sure what to do about it.

"Does disciple Shen have an explanation for this master? Perhaps the beast is being a bad influence."

"Binghe has had *no* complaints from teachers," Shen Yuan protests, because it's *true,* "if anything, I'm the bad influence!"

Shen Qingqiu's glares at him.

"Manners," he snaps, and Shen Yuan huffs and sits back, feeling awkward with how he must hold his hands, "all of the reports mention that you appear to have *demon sympathy."*

"This disciple does not see how this is a surprise," Shen Yuan says, and averts his eyes when Shen Qingqiu's glare narrows further, "I've never been quiet about my interest in the culture of demons."

"Indeed. But this master had hoped that the latest incident would have beaten any of these *sympathies* out of you," Shen Qingqiu drawls, "and yet, disciple Shen remains foolish. And now everyone is complaining about the show of disrespect, demanding this master to discipline you."

Shen Yuan glares down at the floor.

"Perhaps if they acted in a way worthy of respect, this one wouldn't be disrespectful," he mutters.

"If disciple Shen deigned to use his *head,* he would *be silent."*

Shen Yuan shuts his mouth.

Silence settles. The fire crackles, the room the kind of warmth that soaks down to the bone, and he misses Binghe. Not that Binghe is far, of course. He had only been kicked outside so that Shen Qingqiu could 'handle' Shen Yuan in peace. He's probably sweeping away the snow from the path. Still, having the boy out of sight feels wrong. Binghe has looked so sad, so small, for days now and Shen Yuan just wants to make it *stop.* He can't fight anyone for him, not now or ever, but at least he knows how to argue. So Shen Yuan had argued.

No one had seemed to know how to punish him for it, either. Most hadn't dared to even entertain the idea, and is this what Ning Yingying experiences? Diplomatic immunity? He will use it, either way.

But more than that, Shen Yuan knows he is *right.* There is no need to teach them where to stab a demon, because it is *impossible* to remember all the different anatomy of every single one of them! Is it not better to study the enemy you are facing, rather than preparing for a thousand different ones you may never meet? Why underestimate an enemy?

Why always go for violence when one can talk first?

He fidgets. Shen Yuan's eyes wander, and settles upon Fu Yue. The sword is resting against the desk, the moons in the pommel shining in the firelight. He stares at it, and tries to reach out with his qi. There is barely a flicker, but he can feel it. If he had just a little more within him, he could pull it to him with but a gesture. Shen Yuan swallows.

"Shizun, may this one have-"

"No."

"I didn't even-"

"Disciple Shen didn't need to. The answer is *No."*

"..."

"Stop sulking, it is unbecoming."

Shen Yuan sighs, and then yelps when a bead is thrown at him, bouncing against his forehead. When he whips his head up to glare accusingly, Shen Qingqiu isn't looking at him.

Shen Yuan can still see his fucking smirk though.

"You–!"

"Disciple Shen would do well to remember his manners. Especially as this master knows what form of punishment to give him."

Shen Yuan tenses.

Shen Qingqiu's smile is a slow, horrible thing.

"Disciple Shen has difficulty with spice, does he not?"

Oh no.

Shen Yuan flops onto the bed, face first. He groans into the pillow and then lays there. Limp. His hand and wrist ache from the jostling, but he doesn't care. He's *tired.* And his face feels like it's on fire. His mouth feels like he ate *lava.* Or swallowed a whole nest of fire ants, holy shit.

"Did Shizun punish Yuan?"

Shen Yuan groans.

Where the other masters had been unable to come up with a fitting punishment for one who was not to aggravate his wounds, Shen Qingqiu once more showed why he had been one of the first villains in the original. His middle name was Sadism. His profession was Torture. His secret agenda was *Evilness.*

Shen Qingqiu had ordered Ming Fan to go and fetch a jar from the kitchens, and that jar had contained what could only be the evil relative of sichuan pepper, a dried out husk of a thing, red in color and filled with seeds. He had told Ming Fan to feed one to Shen Yuan, and to then leave. Ming Fan had done as told, of course, because *obviously* he would.

Shen Qingqiu had told Shen Yuan to chew and swallow and to not spit it out.

The first bite had tasted like citrus. The bites after that, however, had sent Shen Yuan into the fiery pits of *hell.* His mouth felt numb. His eyes and nose had been leaking, and Shen Qingqiu had drunk his tea and watched, eyes half-lidded in contentment as Shen Yuan was unable to even *wipe his own tears because of his stupid fucking hands.*

The bed shifts as Binghe sits down on it, one hand sweeping his hair out of the way before it settles on Shen Yuan's back. Up and down, a soothing motion that almost makes him forget that he just ate The Horrors. Will he ever regain feeling again? Binghe had given him a cup of water when he arrived, the only available drink other than tea, but it had not been enough.

At least Shen Qingqiu has left to go on another patrol. He wonders if the man has slept even once since the invasion. Shen Yuan isn't sure. He's not dumb enough to ask, but he would be blind to not notice how… *strained* everyone is. Even the masters which Shen Yuan has not

spent the past days arguing with had shown the strain. Even Ning Yingying, smiles still big but her eyes flicking around in a way they never had before.

Little Chen Xiaoling who clings to whoever she can, even Shen Qingqiu himself.

The fact that the man lets her do so speaks for itself.

"... Yuan?" Binghe's voice is soft and low, barely audible.

Shen Yuan blinks; had he been nodding off? He turns his face, too-warm cheek against a scratchy pillow. Binghe's hand is still on his back, but the other boy isn't looking at him. The candlelight makes Binghe's dark curls shine like molten gold, and Shen Yuan stares a little bit longer before he remembers how to speak.

"Yes?" he says.

"... does… does Yuan truly believe that demons can be good?" Binghe asks, voice faltering, uneven and uncertain, and Shen Yuan's heart does a strange little tremble. Like it might jump right out of his chest, if only given the chance.

He wants to sit up, but he dares not move. Binghe's fingers are curling, digging just a little bit against his back. Right between Shen Yuan's shoulder blades. A gentle pressure, and he can feel how Binghe trembles.

"If humans can be evil, then demons can be good," Shen Yuan says, "haven't I told Binghe this for years?"

"Yes, but- but after what happened at Qiong Ding–"

"I've met more bad people than I've met bad demons," Shen Yuan says, and does not think of nails digging into his scalp, of searing heat against his neck, the pale lines that will never fully fade away, "so surely there must be good ones as well. It's only logical."

Binghe is silent. Shen Yuan watches him; his profile is framed with gold, his eyes dark and distant. Binghe's lips are turned downwards, and Shen Yuan wants to poke at the corners to make it into a smile. Instead he lays still, keeping his breathing even, his wrapped hands still.

Luo Binghe steels himself.

"Meng Mo says- *said*- no, says. He says. He's- he didn't leave, he's- I still have him in my head," Binghe blurts out, the words pouring out like a rockfall, boulders tumbling past his lips. Clumsy, frantic, and they come to an abrupt stop as Binghe freezes up. As if he did not mean to actually say them.

His eyes meet Shen Yuan's, and Shen Yuan realizes he was holding his breath. He slowly breathes out, and then Shen Yuan gives him an encouraging smile, hoping he looks calmer than his racing heart.

“Is that why Binghe is asking about demons?” he says, coaxing, watching.

Air leaves Binghe’s lungs in a great *woosh,* and there it is. The smile that Shen Yuan prefers above all. It trembles on Binghe’s face, but it’s still *there* if only for just a moment before it falters again.

“No,” his friend mumbles. He pulls his hand away, and Shen Yuan rolls over so that he can sit up, facing him. Binghe averts his eyes and clutches at his guanyin amulet, knuckles white, “no, it’s worse.”

“Well, I doubt that,” Shen Yuan scoffs and shuffles closer, shoulder against shoulder, “Binghe has an old demon guy in his head. What is worse than that?”

“I’m a demon.”

The words slip out like the flash of light before the lightning strikes. Somehow, despite knowing what was coming, Shen Yuan’s breath hitches upon hearing it outloud. The meaning behind it.

The *trust.*

And then Binghe’s face becomes impossible pale and he refuses to look at Shen Yuan. He’s probably imagining the worst, and why wouldn’t he? Trust is something Binghe hasn’t experienced much of, not even in this life. Shen Yuan knows how fickle it is, too. He can’t blame him.

But Shen Yuan would *never* betray that trust.

Not ever.

“That’s not worse,” Shen Yuan says, and Binghe’s eyes snap to him, lips parting in shock as Shen Yuan stubbornly continues, “I think the old demon guy in Binghe’s head is worse. Binghe is Binghe. Demon, human, I don’t care. Binghe promised to protect me, didn’t he?”

Binghe is still staring. Shen Yuan nudges him, and finally his friend nods.

“Always.”

“So I’m right. There *are* good demons, and Binghe is the best one,” Shen Yuan says, and he says it like it is fact. The sun shines and the grass is green and Binghe is the best.

Luo Binghe’s eyes wells with tears, and Shen Yuan’s calm shatters.

“Oh. Oh! No, no, Binghe, I’m sorry,” he frets, and Shen Yuan raises his arms to tug him into a hug, but he can’t, stupid fucking– “I promise I’m not lying! I really do think Binghe is the best- oof!”

There is nothing but thick, curly hair. Luo Binghe’s arms are wrapped around him, and Shen

Yuan hugs back as well as he can. He can feel a growing wet spot against his shoulder as Binghe sobs.

“Yuan d-doesn’t want me to leave? Even- even though I’m- I’m a–”

“Of course not,” Shen Yuan says, and is surprised by how fierce it comes out, and he hugs as tight as he can, ignoring how it makes his hands ache because he needs to make *sure* that Binghe knows he would never ever let go, “Binghe is- there is no home without Binghe. If Binghe leaves, then I’m coming too. Didn’t Binghe promise that as well? I’m promising it right back! Demon or human, Binghe is Binghe. You’re not allowed to leave without me. You *promised.”*

The answering laughter is wet and choked, but Shen Yuan loves it all the same.

“I promise,” his friend says in between the laughter, and Shen Yuan smiles, and if he’s crying, well, that’s fine! Why wouldn’t he cry? Binghe is crying too, after all, “I promise, Yuan.”

“Good,” he says, and feels warm satisfaction, “it’s a promise.”

Chapter End Notes

MF: what are YOU doing here!!!
Wan Jian Disciple: *smug* Obviously this one is making a delivery on behalf of this one’s Shizun. What, never seen a man work before?
MF: *scoffs* Shidi (derogatory) is no man. If he was, he would be in the FORGE. And this one sees no package on Shidi’s (derogatory) person. What kind of delivery- is that a pangolin.
WJ disciple: this one was told by Shizun to deliver The Honored Soot to disciple Shen.
MF: Shizun would NEVER allow a BEAST inside his house!!!
WJ disciple: he lets you inside, doesn’t he?
MF: *scandalized gasp* This one- you–!
WJ: is Shixiong (derogatory) struggling with his words??? Shameful. Tsk tsk!
MF:
cat fight

SQQ meanwhile has found Harmless Torture and is thriving, if we ignore the paranoia, sleep deprivation and possibly half-assed inedia.
SY is of course in struggle town, but what else is new?
and my feelings for PIWD!Binghe/NYY came out a bit, oops. I just think they probably had the most reasonable and wholesome and tragic romance in all of PIWD, okay??? I would read it. Or the political intrigue and enemies-to-lovers of LBH/SHL.... delicious.

aaaand. We're approaching a time-skip! Not quite yet, but it is approaching ;) just gotta tie up some loose ends.

fanart again? :0

threading-fate made fanart of chapter 6! The glare <3

Artsarasp with SY waking up last chapter!
AND! They also drew a QiJiu scene from the ling xi caves!!!

Flatasafryingpan drew Hot Man Wei Qingwei! Behold!

yourgaygrandpa returns, this time with Ming Fan! Most stressed out head disciple of all time<3

Theimpurelily made a whole??? animation ??? Crazy!!
They also made this funny gif following it!

Jaybirrd drew this on instagram, SY enjoying a cuddling pangolin :D

I keep being humbled by this fandom ;A; everyone are so talented!

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan can count on one hand the times he has visited Qian Cao Peak for medical reasons and *not* been put in a private room.

It's a rarity, for obvious reasons. Qi deviations tend to have a blast radius, and apparently Shen Yuan's qi deviations have a larger blast radius than normal; and so he was put in a private room far away from other private rooms, in the building meant for qi deviations. Other than that, Shen Yuan has been the personal guest of Mu Qingfang, which means cool and fun things like his very own private, world-renowned healer that at times was replaced with Zhu Kang who was a rising talent of his own. If Shen Yuan couldn't heal it by himself, anyway. Most of the time it had been sprains.

If people leave shit on the ground, that shit *will* magically teleport itself in front of his feet right as he's taking a step. He *will* somehow end up rolling down the nearest stairs. This is just a fact of life. His curse, along with his stupid face, dooms him to eternal injuries.

The other reason that Shen Yuan often ends up in a private room is currently looming next to him. Much like a colorful snake warning everyone that it is venomous, the sight of Shen Qingqiu's green robes makes people walk a wide circle around them. Or perhaps it is the look on his face. It's about as friendly as a viper headed lion.

Shen Yuan is tempted to tell him as much. He won't, of course. Much like how Cang Qiong Mountain always sticks together against the world, each separate Peak will show unity against the other Peaks. Disrespect aimed at his own Shizun where others can see would be a disaster.

That, and Shen Yuan has the feeling that if he says anything, Shen Qingqiu will pull out a jar of chilis from somewhere.

His mouth tingles at the mere thought.

So instead of commenting on how Shen Qingqiu's face makes children cry, Shen Yuan tries to smile reassuringly at a nervous looking teenage boy that edges around them. The boy looks at him and immediately walks into a wall, drops the tray of xianxia-based hospital food all over himself and then sits on the floor in a daze before he at last scrambles away, bright red.

"Is he okay?" Shen Yuan asks, staring after him.

"Disciple Bai is fine, he was simply unprepared," Mu Qingfang replies.

"Unprepared for what?"

“Can Yuan-er circulate his qi for this master?”

Shen Yuan looks at him.
Mu Qingfang looks back, calm and clearly in no rush to explain.

Shen Yuan circulates his qi.

“It appears that disciple Shen is healing better than expected,” Mu Qingfang says after a moment, moving his hand away from Shen Yuan’s back, “and the slow gathering of qi is because he has been subconsciously redirecting it to heal quicker. Thankfully, it appears this has caused no other issues than slowing the recovery of your meridians.”

????

“That seems like a big issue,” Shen Yuan points out, voice cracking, “is that not a big issue, Mu-shishu?”

“It is not. What it means is that we can remove your bindings today, and it means that until disciple Shen has made a full recovery, his qi will simply be less than what he is used to.”

“There is no risk of qi deviations?” Shen Qingqiu asks from behind his fan. The man has stepped closer to loom better, eyes sharp.

“Not more than usual.”

“Wait, wait- I can use my hands again? *Already?”*

It had only been a few weeks since the invasion! Shen Yuan remembers that time he broke his arm in *three places* in his previous life. It had taken a million years to heal, especially as there had been complications that had required multiple surgeries. It had revoked his oldest brother’s babysitter privileges, which everyone had been upset about. Their oldest big brother had been the *fun* babysitter, unlike the other one who had insisted on safe things like puzzle solving.

After several months, Shen Yuan had ended up with a wrist that wouldn’t bend properly and a vicious scar that he could convincingly claim came from a lion attack.

It had all been because Shen Yuan had decided to jump off his grandma’s roof when he was seven years old, holding an umbrella.

Not because he thought it would float, of course! But his little sister had insisted that you could float like Princess Peach with the umbrella that they had found in the attic, and Shen Yuan had decided to prove her wrong. And it’s not like he had decided to jump without ensuring he would get caught! His big brother had been meant to catch him, because he had been fifteen, tall and seemingly the coolest person ever.

But as Shen Yuan jumped, his brother had tripped on his fashionably untied shoelaces and fallen into the garden’s turtle pond instead. His brother then had to get three stitches from the

turtle biting him in the cheek.

That turtle had outlived their grandpa and, it turns out, Shen Yuan. Which was a shame because he had been the one set to inherit it.

Would Shen Qingqiu let him get a turtle?

The point was, it had taken months for his arm to heal! And months for his leg, in *this* lifetime, to heal as well! But now he could just? Remove his wrappings? Which Mu Qingfang was doing, explaining that Shen Yuan would have to perform several exercises every day to ensure he would regain full mobility and also he would send them off with a manual on how to massage hands, too, which hopefully someone could help Shen Yuan with. Shen Yuan was a bit busy seeing his hands getting freed to pay proper attention; he didn't know hands could look *naked* until just then. They tingled.

"Binghe can help," he says, and Shen Qingqiu makes a *sound.* It is an indescribable sound, with only the sense of Disapproval being found to describe it in any kind of way.

"It should be a task that disciple Shen can complete on his own," Shen Qingqiu says when Shen Yuan looks towards him, "there is no need to involve *others."*

"If disciple Luo is able to channel qi as he does it, it would be of great benefit to disciple Shen," Mu Qingfang mildly returns, "while it is true that one can massage their own hands, it would be more effective with assistance in this case."

Shen Qingqiu does not look swayed. Which is *ridiculous.* If Mu Qingfang says so, what else could be true? Shen Yuan doesn't think the man has ever been wrong. His now healed hands are proof alone; Shen Yuan wiggles his fingers, the movement stiff but doable. He rolls his wrist, the muscles twinging from not having been used for several weeks. But he *can* move it, and that is proof alone that Mu Qingfang is to be listened to.

"Disciple Luo is not trained for such matters," Shen Qingqiu says as Shen Yuan smiles down at his hands, "he may well make it *worse."*

"Binghe *can,"* he insists as he looks up at the man, "but if Shizun disagrees, then Zhu-shixiong could–"

"Absolutely not."

"But–"

Shen Qingqiu's eyes narrow from behind the fan; Shen Yuan falls quiet, once again aware that they are in public, surrounded by cultivators of different peaks. There are many more than usual, those who are still recovering from the invasion, and everything that has followed as a result. Cang Qiong Mountain Sect can't be seen as weak; whatever spare hands there are, has been sent out on missions. Which of course means more injuries or… *accidents* of a different kind. It's an evil circle, but a needed one.

United front and all that.

He tucks the end of his sleeves into his hands, wrinkling the fabric and waits as Mu Qingfang and Shen Qingqiu talk. It is a tug of war of opinions, Mu Qingfang perfectly neutral to Shen Qingqiu's antagonistic *nope* energy.

Shen Yuan rubs his thumb against the fabric, and even though Mu Qingfang appears to be losing to Shen Qingqiu's stubbornness, he can't help but smile.

Another disciple walks into a nearby wall.

"We are leaving," Shen Qingqiu hisses, and Shen Yuan barely manages a quick farewell before he scrambles to obey, hurrying after the green, swishing robes of his Shizun. Everyone else parts like the sea before his terror. Which is nice; Shen Yuan almost always bumps into people.

"Will this one be allowed to fly by himself?" he asks as he catches up outside, his breath forming clouds of white. It is still early, and the snow sparkles under the sun. When he looks towards Fu Yue, he can see how the white markings in its hilt shimmer, reflecting the light.

"No."

Shen Yuan bites his lip and stares at *his* sword. It is so close, and he knows that if he were to only form a sign, it would return to him. His fingers twitch.

His fingers, which are very cold and stiff.

Shen Yuan grimaces and tucks them into his sleeves. He had not thought he would be freed of sweaty-hand-prison yet, and so he had brought no gloves. Binghe would loan him his if he were there, but Shen Qingqiu had told him to go and attend *much needed lessons.* As if Binghe wouldn't have top grades, if grades were a thing.

"Why not?" he wonders as they make their way through Qian Cao Peak, "if this one can use his hands now…"

"This master suspects that disciple Shen will struggle with wielding *chopsticks,* much less a sword. The answer is no, and he would do well to listen."

Shen Yuan huffs, and then he takes another step down the stairs- less steep than those of Qing Jing Peak, with broader steps as well because Qian Cao enjoyed things like *ease of movement*- and where Shen Qingqiu effortlessly swept through, Shen Yuan finds the one patch of ice on the path and *slips.*

The scream that leaves him is that of a five year old girl, and he flails wildly. Shen Qingqiu whirls around to face him, but before the man can do something like *not help* and no doubt enjoy Shen Yuan's *pain*–

Hands steady him; gentle and firm, and Shen Yuan wheezes, heart beating madly within his

chest as he collects himself, clinging to one of his savior's arms.

"Is Xiao-Yuan alright?"

Shen Yuan blinks up at Yue Qingyuan; the man's brows are furrowed, dark brown eyes looking him over. One hand rests against Shen Yuan's back while the other one is kept captive as he clutches at it like a koala clutches a tree.

"Gege," he blurts out, and Yue Qingyuan's eyes meet his.

For a moment, the man smiles. Soft and honey warm, a little awkward but honest. It is as it always is, and Shen Yuan didn't realize how much he *missed* it, the steady ease of it.

And then he blinks and it's gone, Yue Qingyuan gently freeing his arm and stepping away. Except, no, it's not *gone.* There is still a smile there. It's just not the right one. It feels a bit like seeing the other smile, but behind two layers of thick glass.

Shen Yuan tucks his sleeves over his hands, shielding them from the cold.

"This one greets Shidi and Shizhi," Yue Qingyuan says, perfectly normal and polite, "I did not expect to see either here. Is all well?"

Shen Qingqiu scoffs and moves closer, green eyes glancing briefly towards Shen Yuan in a quick flick of a look, before he focuses on the Sect Leader. He taps his fan against his lips, looking at the man in such a way that Shen Yuan wants to squirm, thinking of bugs pinned down with needles.

Yue Qingyuan's smile remains exactly as it was.

This, somehow, does not make Shen Yuan feel better.

"Does Zhangmen-shixiong see any injuries? Obviously all is well, and his *concern* is not needed," Shen Qingqiu says at last, saying the word *concern* much like he says the word *demon,* "the child's shrieking notwithstanding."

Shen Yuan flushes bright red.

"That is a relief," Yue Qingyuan mildly replies.

Shen Qingqiu searches his face; whatever he finds makes him scowl, and he snaps the fan open.

"Foolish," he says and turns away, "Shen Yuan, follow."

Shen Yuan stares up at Yue Qingyuan, feeling a bit like he swallowed an ice cube whole. It settles in his belly, cold and uncomfortable. When Yue Qingyuan looks at him, perfectly polite and normal and *not right,* Shen Yuan opens his mouth. Closes it.

“Disciple Shen,” Shen Qingqiu snaps, and Shen Yuan averts his eyes and does as told.

“Farewell, Shidi, Shizhi,” Yue Qingyuan calls, and Shen Qingqiu does not bother with a reply. Shen Yuan’s throat feels too tight to manage one.

Perhaps Yue Qingyuan is busy? Too tired to be… *him?* It is a thought that Shen Yuan turns in his head as he steps onto Xiu Ya, and he continues to tug and turn at it like a rubix cube as they fly through the cold winter air. Below, pieces of the rainbow bridge have begun to be rebuilt.

Surely the man would not blame Shen Yuan for being weak. That is not what he does- that is Shen Qingqiu’s job. Yue Qingyuan had fussed when Shen Yuan returned with a fucked up leg, after all. Had peeled fruit and reassured him and… and Shen Yuan isn’t sure what he expected, from not having seen their sect leader for so long.

Just not what he got.

There weren’t even any F-points.

Yue Qingyuan *always* gives him F-points.

Upon arriving at Qing Jing Peak, Shen Qingqiu is quick to leave him behind. Shen Yuan stares for a moment after the man who stalks off while muttering dark things under his breath, and then he shrugs and decides to track down his friends. He can ask for the hand manual later.

There is no way he is going to stay home alone with an angry Shen Qingqiu. Shen Yuan may be weak, but he’s not *stupid.*

So he wanders around, hiding his hands within his sleeves as he does so. There are slippery stairs which Shen Yuan narrowly avoids, and there is Ming Fan rushing past while yelling at Cui Wenyan who looks like a miserable and tired ox with his broad shoulders and constant burdens. He, out of everyone, has become a pack mule since the bridges broke.

At one point, he has to step aside as a group of tiny Qiong Ding disciples pass through, led by Heng He. Their black and white uniforms stand out among all the green, and Shen Yuan has to hold back a coo at how they trail after their guide. Qiong Ding Peak is much bigger than Qing Jing, which means they always accept more disciples. It is also a peak that has a lot of cultivators which tend to stick around the mountain rather than leave it.

Which in turn means a lot of them are *born* into their peak, which is a whole other thing. Most importantly, it means the children are *children,* too young to be actual official disciples, and he can see more than one of them stubbornly puff up their cheeks as they walk past, clinging to each other to avoid slipping.

The shuffling waddles of black and white themed kids really does make him think of penguins. Do they exist in this world? Do *demon penguins* exist? Shen Yuan almost stops his search to go to the library.

But only almost.

It is only when he leaves the nice, mostly well-swept paths and instead steels himself to go wading into the deep snow that he begins to get results. Mostly because the tracks of what must be Ning Yingying and Binghe are *very* visible, including one spot where he's pretty sure at least one of them faceplanted, leaving the imprint of a snow angel. But like one that fell from great height and kind of splattered all over.

Definitely Ning Yingying. Binghe would *never.*

(it does look like someone tugged another into falling as well, but he is going to pretend he's blind)

Shen Yuan walks where they walked for ease of travel, holding his arms high to avoid the snow touching his hands, and soon he finds himself in a clearing. It is the one where he and Ning Yingying trained before he was injured; before the snow fell, that is. He stops at the edge of it, taking in the sight before him.

The signs of battle are clear as day. Deep furrows have been carved through what once must have been a smooth blanket of snow, a beautiful landscape untouched by mankind. Now wrecked by an intense war without winners.

Binghe and Ning Yingying lie in the middle of the carnage, panting great columns of white smoke as they catch their breath, faces red from the cold. For a moment his heart twinges, and then he sees how far apart they lay from each other. Shen Yuan shoves it aside.

"Hello? Are there any survivors?" he calls out, and laughs when Binghe pops up like a bunny, snow going flying. Binghe blinks at him, and then smiles and scrambles up. It's far from graceful, the protagonist halo helpless to stop gravity as Binghe has to fight the deep snow to get back onto his feet.

"Yuan," he says, and manages to avoid Ning Yingying's grab at his leg when he jumps over her, "you're back!" he says it like Shen Yuan has been away at war. It makes him feel giddy

and warm, and he smiles helplessly, watching Binghe struggle through the snow.

“A-Yuan missed it!” Ning Yingying says and makes her own graceless attempt to stand up, huffing and puffing as she does, “we fought! No one won–”

“I won.”

“No one won,” Ning Yingying says louder, ignoring Binghe’s disagreeing eye roll and Shen Yuan’s laugh, “and if A-Yuan wasn’t injured, he could have joined us! So maybe it was good that A-Yuan wasn’t there, this Shijie wouldn’t want to make her Shidi cry after she beat him up!”

“I wouldn’t lose,” he protests as they get closer, “why does Shijie assume I would lose?”

“Shidi can’t even make a snowball,” she laughs, and one braided bun has become less of a bun. Binghe’s hair has held up better, but not by much and only because it has no braids.

Shen Yuan can’t wait to braid it again.

“This one most definitely can,” he says, and finally reveals his bare hands with a grin.

Both of them gasp.

“A-Yuan has hands!” Ning Yingying cheers as Shen Yuan wiggles his fingers at them, “A-Luo, let’s pelt him with snowballs!”

“Wha- no!” Shen Yuan protests from where Binghe is holding his hands, examining them, “don’t pelt me with snowballs!”

“Shidi can get a free throw,” Ning Yingying promises, and he kicks snow at her in retaliation. She only giggles, letting it hit her.

“They are truly healed?” Binghe asks as Shen Yuan tugs his hands free from him, “but- but Yuan’s leg took so long?”

“Mu-shishu said it’s because I’ve been subconsciously healing myself even though I wasn’t supposed to,” Shen Yuan admits, scooping up snow as Ning Yingying hops side to side like some very fluffy and cute looking wrestler ready to get *punted right in the face, he will show her*– “so that’s why! He might have said more, but… um… but…”

The snow was so cold it felt *warm* against his skin. He had expected this. What Shen Yuan had not expected was that his grip strength was gone. Not there. Absent from their gathering.

No matter how he tries to form his hands, the snow will just not hold its destined round shape.

“Oh no,” Shen Yuan says.

“What?” Ning Yingying asks, hopping closer with a bright grin on her face, “what’s *oh no?”* and then she sees as his third attempt to make a snowball falls apart in his hands.

She shrieks with laughter, sounding like a demented hyena.

“Stop- they are *stiff,* alright, this one just- I just need to, to train them or something, stop- Shijie shut up!”

“Let me help,” Binghe says, stepping closer. He pours more snow into Shen Yuan’s hands, red and a little wet from the previous attempts. Before he can open his mouth to point out that this changes *nothing,* Binghe puts his hands over Shen Yuan’s and presses down.

Gentle and firm, and Shen Yuan’s breath catches in his throat as his friend slowly helps him form a snowball. He feels oddly warm, their winter breaths mingling while Binghe hums and angles his hands this and that way, warming Shen Yuan’s even as they shape the most perfect snowball of all time. There are snowflakes caught in Binghe’s eyelashes. Bright white spots that highlight how long they are.

“There,” Binghe mumbles and slowly drops his hands, “see?”

Shen Yuan blinks; he drags his eyes away from Binghe’s face and looks down at their work.

The snowball is perfectly round.

“Oh,” he says, and smiles at his friend, cheeks red from the cold air and nothing else, “thank you, Binghe.”

And then he nails Ning Yingying in the face with it.

“Can Yuan take my gloves now?” Binghe suggests as Ning Yingying splutters, “you look cold.”

“Please.”

After some epic warfare, where they both teamed up on Ning Yingying who in turn called them weaklings and cowards even though she dumped snow down Shen Yuan’s inner robes, the three of them flopped down among the demolished landscape. For a long moment, there was only the sound of their heavy breathing and the trilling of birds plucking bright red berries out of trees.

Shen Yuan holds one of Binghe’s hands in his, warming it up with the gloves that he had

borrowed. Ning Yingying lies on his other side, breathless giggles escaping her every now and then.

"... why *are* we out here?" Shen Yuan asks once his heart has calmed, once he feels warm despite the cold all around them, soaking in the presence of his friends, "was there not a lesson which A-Ying and Binghe were meant to be at?"

Something involving writing, Shen Yuan knew. It had been why Shen Qingqiu had felt no remorse yanking him away to a medical exam. Fuck, he was so far behind on *everything.*

"There was," Binghe agrees, "we were learning how to detect ghostly qi with the help of talismans. But-"

"A Shixiong returned with a broken sealing pouch," Ning Yingying cuts in, "so the master had to leave to help! There was demonic qi *everywhere.* Made the little Qiong Ding babies cry."

"Of course they would! That's scary," Shen Yuan defends them, though that would explain why Heng He was wandering around with the group of tiny children, who should have been at their own, baby-approved lesson, "but how did he manage that? Which Shixiong?"

"Hu Song," Binghe says.

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose.

"He is normally good at those things," Shen Yuan says, because… because yes, he did not trust the guy even now, years after he watched Zhao De grab Shen Yuan by the hair in the storage room, but, well. He *was* a good cultivator. If one ignored that… mishap. "Did it break on the way?"

"Don't know! But the master was worried that some minor demons might have followed, so they left. And we got to play! It was a boring lesson, anyway."

"It is important to know how to handle demonic and ghostly qi, Shijie," Binghe points out. Something about the way he says it twinges at Shen Yuan's brain, though. He stares up at the sky, lined with the trees and bamboo forming a circle around the clearing as his friends bicker.

Sealing pouches were a useful tool for night hunts. Correctly and safely storing body parts of whatever foe they had slain could mean the difference between life and death. Some attracted *more* creatures even in death; others could drive one insane, or make you sick. But pouches were only useful for sealing away *parts.* Something that was technically dead and mindless.

There were sound dampening arrays that took ages to set up and were finicky about what sounds they could seal. There were those that helped disguise one's scent or appearance, if only for short moments. But nothing that could *hide* a demon's qi. Why would there be? Cultivators wanted to find demons, and most sentient demons could control it just fine.

Except Binghe couldn't. Not in the original; not at first. Only through trial and error in the Endless Abyss had he learned, but…

Was it possible?

When Binghe's seal breaks during the Immortal Alliance Conference, it will make every cultivator sprint towards it, whether he gets pushed into the Abyss or not. But if they could hide it, and then maybe 'get lost' in the chaos until Binghe could control his appearance…

Shang Qinghua had said that his mission was to *open* the Abyss using Mobei-Jun. There had been nothing about Binghe actually going into it, and Shen Yuan still had nothing assigned to himself either.

He sits up.

"Binghe," he blurts out, "I want to go to the library."

"Alright," Binghe amicably agrees and gets up, while Ning Yingying groans.

"But your Shijie can't go there," she whines, sitting up to pout at them as Binghe helps Shen Yuan get onto his feet, patting the snow off of him, "that's not fair!"

Shen Yuan blinks at her.

"Why not? Did Shijie get kicked out?" Were the books at last free from her treacherous hands? He knew she didn't *intentionally* harm them but, well. There had been incidents.

"No," Ning Yingying sighs, "it's just so *boring* in there. Why must A-Yuan and A-Luo go there *now?"*

"It's warm, and I had an idea," Shen Yuan explains, "if we take your hands, will A-Ying get up or will she yank us down?"

Ning Yingying holds her hands up and smiles wide.

The two boys exchange a glance.

"Shijie can get up by herself," they say in unison.

"So mean!" she complains, but she giggles as she says it, which means Shen Yuan feels no guilt at all as she gets up by herself, "this Shijie is going to find Shimei, then! Teach her how to make snowballs, since no one ever taught Shidi."

"This one's hands are just *stiff,* I can make snowballs! I just need to exercise them first! Shizun even has a book on it."

"Shijie believes you," she replies, clearly mocking him.

“Binghe believes me,” Shen Yuan huffs and grabs Binghe’s hand, because the other boy still has to ask for his gloves back and he looks cold, “right?”

“Of course,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan squints at him, because Binghe’s eyes are just a little *too* big, his smile a little too wide, “just because this humble one has yet to see it–”

Shen Yuan shoves him into a snowpile.

It takes a while for them to get to the library after that.

Qing Jing Peak’s library is a big place.

Arranged like a maze with its bookshelves which reach the ceiling and with the night pearls lighting the way, it often reminds Luo Binghe of *magic.* The kind he used to believe in, when he was a little boy.
It is not that he has *stopped* believing in it now. He thinks, perhaps, that magic still exists. It is simply that he knows more now of how it works. How it functions, how to use it.

Except for this kind.

They sit in a small corner, tucked away deep within the confines of the library. Books on demons, seals and artifacts have been piled high around them. Walls of knowledge, shielding them from view. Like this, it is easy to believe that they are alone. Just the two of them.

Luo Binghe looks up from the book he has been reading. Beside him, Shen Yuan is hunched over a scroll, brows furrowed as he reads with a focus that is always fascinating to see.

The light from the night pearls is a pale golden color, nearly white. It makes Shen Yuan’s eyes glimmer like gemstones when he tilts his head. Luo Binghe watches him for a moment. The way his friend taps a finger against the wood of their table, the motion odd and trembling but possible. The way his hair falls when he shifts, a curtain of black silk, that Shen Yuan absently tucks away behind one pale ear, the tip of it a soft petal pink. He looks like a statue, untouchable with his sharp cheekbones, his lips turned downwards and eyes narrowed with concentration.

And then Shen Yuan glances his way, and smiles. It’s a small, pleased smile that sends Luo Binghe’s into a fluttering pitter-patter inside his chest. It makes him think of blossoming flowers, of Spring arriving early. He smiles back, and Shen Yuan hums a soft little sound and continues to read.

As if he isn’t sitting next to a demon.

It has been days since Luo Binghe told Shen Yuan of Meng Mo's reveal. That he had demonic heritage of some kind, a seal that may one day break and reveal the filthy lineage he has inherited. A horrible thing that should have made Shen Yuan cast him aside, should have resulted in the call for Shen Qingqiu and swords and fire, something that would cleanse the world of something like *Luo Binghe.*

Instead Shen Yuan had hugged him and promised *Always.*

Luo Binghe can't deny that the thought of what lurks within him is still disquieting. He still would rip his veins open and clean his blood of what it has, if only he could. But it's a little bit harder, now, to nourish the hatred all cultivators, all *humans* should feel.

Because Shen Yuan told him that demons could be good.

Because his best friend still hugged him, still sat so close their feet bumped against each other under the table. Because despite the fact that Shen Yuan has nearly died to demons, his friend looked at Luo Binghe and said that Binghe was *home.*

Home.

There is magic which they learn, using qi and talismans, arrays and music and the way they *move* as they flash their swords. Magic that one can understand and learn, magic one can master.

But he thinks Shen Yuan is a different kind of magic altogether. Something holy and pure, blessed and beautiful.

And Shen Yuan has decided that *Luo Binghe* is worthy of it.

He swallows, and jerks his gaze back to the book in front of him.

It is a thick tome, the words painted so small that he often has to lean in close to make them out properly. It speaks of ancient artifacts that sound unreal, most of them now destroyed or lost to time. Shen Yuan had explained, in vague terms for secrecy, what he wanted to research. The idea had been fascinating on its own merit, if seemingly useless for anyone but the two of them.

Meng Mo speaks of the seal breaking like a good thing; something to look forward to, as if Luo Binghe thirsts for power just for power itself. It has felt like a looming death sentence since he learned of it. They don't know *what* kind of demonic heritage he has, only that it is a strong one. It may go back generations. It might be one of his birth parents.

Either way, once it breaks, there will be a time he can't hide what he is. He hadn't thought to tell Shen Yuan that. Had… done the foolish thing, and pushed the idea of the future away from himself.

And yet, somehow, Shen Yuan is already trying to find a solution. As if he had known of it

already, the way he always seems to know of strange things. Luo Binghe used to think–

He doesn't know where Shen Yuan came from. He suspects, of course, with the faded brand on his neck, the way they had met around a small fire by the foot of the mountain. He had thought his friend was learned because he had been a servant of some noble family, a slave running away from someone with too much money and too little heart. And Luo Binghe doesn't think he is *wrong,* necessarily, but he doesn't think he is right, either.

But does Shen Yuan *know?*

One of the books he had found before this one had spoken of foresight. Shen Yuan hadn't spared it more than a brief glance, but he hadn't protested it when Luo Binghe grabbed it either. It spoke of places, creatures and artifacts that offered a hint of the future, pools of sacred water that let you see what could be. It also spoke of ancient times where some had the gift of foresight.

It had said that some were aware of their gift, while others weren't. And no matter how he looks at it, he can't be *sure* of which one Shen Yuan is. Because it is clear, now, that his friend has a gift.

But surely Shen Yuan would tell him if he knew? Unless someone had hurt him for it, in the past. Demons were filth, yes, but Shen Yuan was right in pointing out that humans were not always good, either.

Maybe that was why he ran away from wherever he came from? They must have found out what he could see, and…

Luo Binghe breathes in. Out.

If they ever show up, he won't let them touch Yuan. Not ever. Before that happens, he will grow as strong as his friend believes he can be, and he *will* protect him. Because Shen Yuan promised *always,* and Luo Binghe promised it right back. And Yuan is with him now. He is *fine* now, even if his hands are clumsy, his fingers stiff.

The other thing the book said was that every seer was a virgin.

That, uh. Luo Binghe thinks maybe he should not think about that part. Especially not about how they *stopped* being seers once they–

He should be happy staying friends. That was more than he could have ever hoped for, after revealing his heritage.

"Ugh," Shen Yuan huffs, and Luo Binghe looks back up, "my stupid *hands."*

"Oh. Did the scroll roll up again?" he asks, peering at it to see that yes, indeed. Shen Yuan must have lost his grip on it, and now the scroll was loosely rolled up once more.

"Yeah. If it was made of wood, this would be easier, but what if I tear it?" Shen Yuan says,

glaring down at it. His lips are pursed in a pout, and Luo Binghe tears his eyes away from it, "if Mu-shishu was not a renowned healer, I would seriously question his judgment."

"Yuan said that Shizun had a manual on how to treat it?"

Shen Yuan nods.

"Shall we go and ask Shizun for it?"

"But then we have to *talk* to him," Shen Yuan whines and leans against him, heavily enough that Luo Binghe has to steel himself to avoid toppling over, "and Binghe, he was so *mad* when we left Qian Cao Peak. You know how Shizun is when he's mad."

Is there ever a moment when Shen Qingqiu is not?

"More than usual?" he asks, and smiles when Shen Yuan giggles, body shaking against his with it. He feels how Yuan rests his head against Luo Binghe's, rubbing against it like a cat wishing to be petted.

"Yes, Binghe, *somehow* more than usual," Shen Yuan says. There is a moment of hesitation before he speaks again, voice lower as he says, "I think there is something wrong with Shibo. Or- or that I did something–"

"You didn't," Luo Binghe cuts him off, "the sect leader would not blame Yuan for anything. We know this."

"There is no *we* in this," Shen Yuan mutters, straightening. Luo Binghe mourns the absence, but he turns to face his friend despite it, "I just- he acted… I don't *know.* But Shizun didn't like it either, and I can't even go and ask Shibo what's going on because Shizun won't give back Fu Yue, so I can't fly over there."

He looks down at his hands and scowls.

"I don't even think I can form a sword sign."

Luo Binghe hesitates.

"... what if I fly you?"

Shen Yuan's eyes snapped to him; wide and beautifully green, his lips parted. His cheeks are dusted with pink and looks like they would be soft to touch.

Luo Binghe curls his fingers inwards, keeping his hands in his lap.

"Shizun would be mad," Shen Yuan says, but his eyes *glimmer,* a slow smile spreading, almost shy and Luo Binghe smiles back.

"If he catches us," he points out, and Shen Yuan's smile becomes a giddy grin, a little bit

crooked and imperfect, and all the more perfect because of it. Luo Binghe thinks that even if Shen Qingqiu punishes him for it, it will be worth it for this smile alone.

“If he catches us,” Shen Yuan agrees.

And then he looks at their table, still full of books and scrolls, and Shen Yuan falters. He frowns, biting his pink lips, and then sighs.

“... maybe we do it tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Luo Binghe agrees, and helps Shen Yuan unroll the scroll once more, and feels nothing but quiet, burning joy.

I love you, he thinks, and knows he will never stop doing so.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: I don't care about Yue Qingyuan and also I hate him
YQY: *smiles wrong*
SQQ, gritting his teeth: *I don’t care.*

Woo!! Funny thing is, wrapping things up is HARD guys. No timeskip yet, but look at these love struck teens. Yuck.
Anyway! I will try to finish the next chapter on time, but it miiiight be delayed? Not sure yet. It's just, well. The game Frostpunk 2 is coming out this friday <_< and i'm very excited for it, for I love being a tyrant to pixel people. And either I will be glued to it, or I will manage to unglue myself to do some obligatory writing. I mean if you ALSO enjoy challenging strategy games and want to handle squabbling politicians, steampunk and insane snowstorms that will make you feel like Svalbard is warm...

Anyway I figured you guys deserved a warning just in case. I will try my best to not become a game addict :D

Fanart time <3

Anqelbean drew lovely BingYuan in their wedding robes <3

theImpurelily drew??? The Unnamed Wan Jian disciple and Ming Fan??? Guys!! They have ship art, amazing.
They also made this hilarious vine video :D

Quest-draws made a comic where SQQ loses his mind and I love it dearly.

Last but not least, distinguishedstudentfishalien drew evil SQQ torturing his dear disciple <3

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It has begun to grow dark by the time the boys return.

Shen Qingqiu hears them as they bicker outside; the sound of them stomping snow off their boots, the laughter as they tell each other to stay still, to let them help as they dust off whatever remains on their clothes. Taking their *time,* as if there are not more important things which he could be doing. If not for them, Shen Qingqiu would be patrolling his peak already. He would not be waiting for some brats to return home past an acceptable hour, listening to their idiotic giggles.

He drinks his tea and keeps the warmth of it in his mouth until it burns. Only when the door opens does he swallow it, turning his gaze back to the scrolls which he had been reading.

“You are late,” Shen Qingqiu says as the boys finally come inside.

They freeze like two fawns caught by a wolf, eyes wide and posture stiff, casting long shadows behind them as they stay by the door. A cold gust cuts past them, causing the candles to flicker. The hearth burns a little brighter, the fire washing the room in gold.

It is only when he deigns to look at them that they remember to close the door. Shuffling inside, their hands empty and visible by their sides, and yet they act as if they have done something wrong. Luo Binghe keeps his gaze averted in a barely passable act of respect, while Shen Yuan’s eyes flicker about like a thief caught in the act.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrow.

“... we apologize for being late, Shizun,” Shen Yuan says after the boy finally realizes that Shen Qingqiu asked a question and has yet to receive an answer, “we were in the library and- and lost track of time.”

“And yet, disciple Shen has not brought any books back with him. This master recalls he often returned with many; is this a new habit of his, since this master has been gone?”

The boy winces; a pull down of his lips, a slight hiss between teeth and eyes briefly squeezing shut. Too expressive, as always. Incapable of hiding his guilt, of successfully telling a lie. Pathetic.

“Disciple Luo. Leave.”

To the little beast’s credit, he does not immediately obey. He lingers, like a loyal mutt. Would he yelp like one as well, if Shen Qingqiu were to hit him? Would he scamper away, tail between his legs, at the first sign of an actual threat? For now he stays next to Shen Yuan,

small and scruffy in comparison to the other boy's lanky height. Shen Qingqiu stares him down, and he idly remembers the time that Shen Yuan attempted to sleep in the woodshed. It is a fitting place for a beast who has begun to consider stealing from its owner's plate.

Shen Yuan grabs Luo Binghe's hand and gives it a squeeze.

"I'll see Binghe after tea," the boy whispers, and Shen Qingqiu watches as the other boy at last concedes, sulking off to their room which he has so *kindly* allowed them in. He holds back a sneer in favor of rising from his seat. There is tea to be prepared, and he does not trust the boy to carry anything at the moment.

As it is, he appears to struggle with the simple task of removing his winter clothes. Even by the time that Shen Qingqiu returns with the tea- and a cup that he will not mind *too* much if it breaks, though he will ensure the brat pays for it if it does- the boy has yet to remove the gloves on his hands. The rest of him is rumpled, winter shoes fallen over, the outer robe in a haphazard pile beside him.

He does not remember the boy wearing gloves earlier.

Shen Qingqiu sits down and waits for Shen Yuan to sit down before him, back turned and hair tucked out of the way. He fidgets, clumsy and unsuccessful in being rid of the gloves, unwilling to ask for help.

Idiot.

"Does disciple Shen require assistance?" Shen Qingqiu asks, pressing his hands against the boy's back, "he appears to struggle with a task which this master is certain he once was capable of."

The boy flushes; the red crawls down his neck, up the tips of his ears. Perhaps if he bothered to wear his hair differently, such signs could be hidden. If not for his too expressive face, of course. That needs a different method entirely.

"This one is fine, Shizun," he says through gritted teeth, "as Shizun is *aware,* this one's hands–"

"Silence."

"Wha- Shizun asked–"

"Silence."

The boy makes an offended sound, and Shen Qingqiu's lips quirk upwards. Still, the boy knows to obey when needed. Silence falls as Shen Qingqiu begins to pour qi into his spiritual veins. Under his hands, he feels how Shen Yuan relaxes, the muscles which had been tense now loosening. Shoulders slumping downwards, the red flush of his skin fading away as he forgets his embarrassment.

Shen Qingqiu focuses.

Soon, he removes his hands. The boy moves to the other side of the table, and manages at last to remove the gloves once he sits back down. Though he does it with his teeth like a feral beast, before balling them up and tucking them away into his sleeves. The little idiot then has the nerve to reach for the tea pot, fingers brushing against it before Shen Qingqiu smacks them away with his fan.

Shen Yuan yanks his hands back with a hiss.

“Do not be foolish. As if you could do this without causing a mess. Until disciple Shen is capable of writing his own name, he shall not pour the tea. This master will.” He pauses. “That is, of course, a high task, as disciple Shen had difficulty doing so *before* his injuries.”

“This one could write his name,” Shen Yuan defends, rubbing his hand, the skin red from where he was struck, “Shizun is exaggerating!”

“Disciple Shen could not write *neatly,”* Shen Qingqiu points out, and then continues, “this master has ordered Ming Fan to assist in the… *therapy,* starting tomorrow. Perhaps he can spare the time to teach disciple Shen how to write without dirtying himself as well. Though it may be a lost cause, for many masters have tried before.”

“I’ll show you a lost cause,” the brat mutters, and Shen Qingqiu considers hitting him once more. It would take effort, however, with the table between them. Shen Qingqiu feels warm and lazy, the hearth’s heat warming his side and he does not feel like moving. It is not worth it.

“Show respect, unless disciple Shen would like to revisit his previous punishment.”

That, at last, has the boy fall silent.

Shen Qingqiu watches as the boy picks up his cup of tea. He uses both hands, holding it the way a small child may, palms pressed flat against it and hands trembling with effort to not drop it. The sight brings back memories of a time long gone; of dusty roads and cracked wooden cups, of watching Yue Qi wipe small children’s faces clean and–

The smile from earlier that day.

He drinks from his own cup as the memory needles at him, like a stain unwilling to be washed away. Yue Qingyuan has many smiles, each one infuriating. The one he had shown at Qian Cao Peak was not a new one. It is one which Shen Qingqiu remembers often seeing, when he was Shen Jiu and new at the sect. Years ago, a smile that had made him want to claw the man’s face off.

There were those demonic cultivators who harvested skin from corpses, stealing faces to wear as masks. To fool others, a mockery and desecration of someone’s life. The sight of that smile had brought them to mind; as Shen Jiu, he had fantasized about prying it away with a knife. To dig with his nails until it came loose enough to reveal the Qi-ge that must have been

trapped underneath.

Time has worn away at such thoughts.

Shen Qingqiu knows better now.

He curls his fingers, nails scraping against the cup in his hands. He puts it down with a firm *clack,* and sees Shen Yuan clumsily mirror him in response, the tea sloshing. It does not spill. Good.

“Mu Qingfang claimed that handling certain objects may hasten disciple Shen’s recovery,” he says, and pulls out the fan which he had kept in his sash. It is a simple one, with a branch of plum blossoms painted across its width. He tosses it to the boy, who of course is unable to catch it. There is an attempt, but one that fails miserably. Even as Shen Yuan picks it up from where it had fallen to the floor, his grasp is weak and his face once more flush with mortification.

“How will a fan help this one?” the boy asks, putting it down onto the table. He flexes his fingers, the motion painful judging from his wince. “Can’t one open it with a flick of the wrist?”

Shen Qingqiu snaps his own fan open and raises a brow.

“Did disciple Shen not break his wrist as well?” he mocks, “if it is so easy, perhaps he shall demonstrate to this master. Go on.”

Shen Yuan scowls; always so expressive, and never threatening. He does not pick up the fan. A pity, as it would have been amusing.

“If you do well, you may keep it as a reward.”

The scowl falters. Shen Qingqiu watches as the brat looks down at the fan, considering. Rejecting the offer would be a lie; he remembers how often the boy would stare at his collection before Shen Qingqiu entered the caves, hands always reaching before being caught.

The boy rarely reaches for things.

But fans, for whatever reason, appear too tempting to not touch.

“Shizun is being truthful?” Shen Yuan asks at last, raising his gaze to meet Shen Qingqiu’s.

“Is disciple Shen claiming this one to be a liar?” he replies, lowering his voice. The boy averts his eyes.

“No, Shizun,” the boy replies.

It doesn’t sound like a lie; that, at least, it appears the boy knows how to do. Speaking a lie is

different from acting one out, however. What does it matter, if those with sharp eyes can figure out the truth from how one sits, how one moves?

'If one moves like a slave, then one is *a slave.'*

The words are echoes from the past. The previous Peak Lord had spoken them casually, a nonchalance to the words. His master had looked at Shen Jiu and smiled, sharp and pleased.

'While a killer moves like a killer.'

Shen Qingqiu snaps his fan closed once more.

"Stand up."

Shen Yuan startles.

"What?"

Shen Qingqiu rises from his seat.

"Stand up," he repeats, sharper, letting his voice strike like a whip. The boy scrambles to obey. There is confusion in his eyes, the fan he had been given left on the table.

Shen Yuan stands. His hands are clasped in front of him, held low, chin dipped down and eyes tracking Shen Qingqiu as he walks around the table. Only when their eyes meet does the boy avert his own, though there is a furrow between his brows.

"Walk to the bookcase, and then return."

The boy frowns.

"Shizun, this one does not need to practice walking. As Shizun pointed out, this one's injuries were located in his hands."

"Do not question this master. *Walk,* disciple Shen. Now."

The brat grumbles, but moves as told. He walks back and forth and repeats it with only small complaints when told to, until the stiffness loosens into something natural. Shen Qingqiu watches the whole time.

"Enough," he says, and Shen Yuan comes to a stop, "you walk like a servant. How will anyone take you seriously as a cultivator, if disciple Shen walks like some beaten waif?" he berates, and smacks the boy's hands with the fan. "Do not hold them in front of you. A cultivator holds them by his *sides,* where he can quickly grab his sword."

"What sword? This disciple seems to be missing one!" Shen Yuan snaps, and then squawks when he receives a smack to his lower back, forcing him to stand up straight. "Shizun!"

“Yuan!?”

“I’m fine!”

“But–”

Shen Qingqiu does not roll his eyes as he turns to look; the beast lingers in the doorway from where he slammed the door open. Dark eyes flicking between them, one hand digging fingers into the doorframe. As if the brat would *truly* dare to get between them if Shen Qingqiu hit to injure.

He does not think of Qiong Ding Peak and its blood-soaked stone.

“It is a lesson which disciple Luo need not attend,” he says, though that may not be true. Luo Binghe does not walk like a person of servitude the way Shen Yuan does, nor should it matter as the beast does not share Shen Qingqiu’s face. He walks like the street mutt that he is, making himself small but failing to do it without seeming suspicious. It would be a waste of energy to correct it when there is no connection between them.

However, Luo Binghe does wear green.

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes as he looks at them.

“Or perhaps he shall. Disciple Luo. Walk.”

Those of Qing Jing Peak shall walk with *pride.*

Whether they deserve to or not.

They lay in the dark, silent for a long, awkward moment.

“My posture can’t have been *that* bad,” Shen Yuan finally whispers, shifting in his bed to face Binghe. The moonlight shines through, barely letting him see it when Binghe lifts his head, pinpricks of light reflecting in the other boy’s dark eyes.

“Yuan’s posture is fine,” he assures, then falters. “Was mine…?”

“Of course Binghe’s posture was good! Shizun is just being *weird.”*

Really, really fucking weird. Shen Yuan does not look towards the System, nor does he look at the notifications about F-points.

Glitched. Clearly *glitched.* The System or Shen Qingqiu, he doesn't know. But one of them. Maybe even both.

His fingers sting from where he kept getting smacked. Shen Yuan huffs and curls them inwards, slow and stiff, and hopes Ming Fan will be too busy to do *therapy* in the morning.

They can do therapy *after* he speaks with Yue Qingyuan. He doesn't exactly know *why* that smile bothered him so much, but it feels urgent. Important. Something that cannot wait.

Unlike Ming Fan, who surely can.

Shen Yuan may, perhaps, have forgotten what removing bandages *means* in a cultivator sect. He had, perhaps, planned to fly off with Binghe the very first thing in the morning, hoping Shen Qingqiu would be too busy being a grumpy hermit with paperwork to pay them any mind.

He doesn't know how he forgot that they always do physical lessons in the mornings. The snow crunches under his feet as he runs along the paths of Qing Jing Peak.

Shen Yuan gasps and stops. Braces himself, hunched over, hands pressed against his knees as he tries to catch his breath. It comes out in large, fluffy clouds of white that only reminds him that it's cold as *fuck* outside.

"Shen-Shidi!" Ming Fan snaps, "keep running!"

Shen Yuan groans and straightens up, readying himself to keep going. And then he yelps as a snowball hits him in the back of the head, followed by a cackling Ning Yingying running past him.

"A-Yuan is so slow!"

"Hey!" he yells and runs after her, and they both ignore Ming Fan ordering them to stop playing around.

A mistake, it turns out, when they are both told to run ten more laps later by an elder who takes over. Ming Fan is scolded for not being more stern.

At least it is not one of the teachers that Shen Yuan argued with.

Small mercies.

“This one has finished studying the manual which Shizun gave this one,” Ming Fan says, voice prim and proper as he sits down without warning, “and this one believes it is of utmost importance that we begin right this moment.”

Shen Yuan looks down at his bowl of rice, at his hot broth-soup and the spoon he is using for both because chopsticks are a lost cause and because, well. Soup.

“... Dashixiong,” he slowly says, “this one was *eating.”*

“What manual?” Ning Yingying asks, leaning over the table to beam a too wide smile full of sunshine and the kind of mischief that foxes get up to, “did Ming-shixiong get a new cultivation manual? Did he advance? Can this one look too?”

“Ming Fan did not advance,” Binghe says, and places a pickled plum on Shen Yuan’s drooping spoon, “this one believes it is a manual on healing Yuan’s hands.”

Ning Yingying makes a disappointed sound and sits back in her seat.

“Shizun told this one to handle it, and I’m too busy later to do it then,” Ming Fan says, scowling, “and Luo-shidi should speak properly to his *Dashixiong.”*

“This one apologizes,” Binghe blandly replies, before he gently nudges at Shen Yuan’s spoon with his chopsticks, “is Yuan not hungry?”

Shen Yuan’s stomach growls.

“Very,” he sighs, before he eats the offered plum. After doing so, Shen Yuan puts the spoon down. His hand was cramping anyway. “Must we truly do it here, Shixiong?”

“Where else? Shizun should not have to listen to Shidi’s complaints when we practice!”

All around them, there is the din and clamor that comes with a full foodhall. Not that it is as loud as it *could* be, but even quiet nerd cultivators make sounds when sitting down to eat. And now there is also the extra voices of little penguin-clothed children.

Heng He, Shen Yuan notes, appears to have become a permanent babysitter to the bunch. The guy doesn’t seem to mind. Chen Xiaoling has managed to infiltrate their ranks as well, looking very proud to be older than someone for once. In her green robes, she stands out like a blade of grass in a field of snow.

One child bursts into loud, wailing tears.

“It’s not exactly a relaxing environment,” Shen Yuan mutters.

“Can’t this one help instead? We share a room, if this one learns what Ming-shixiong has, Yuan and I could do it at the beginning of the day,” Binghe points out, because that is the logical, sensible way to do things.

But Shen Qingqiu wasn’t a logical or sensible man, and Ming Fan was his dedicated lackey. Shen Yuan suspects that if Shen Qingqiu claimed the sky was green, Ming Fan would agree without question.

Ming Fan huffs and crosses his arms.

“This is *my* task, entrusted to this one by Shizun! I’m not letting some untrained Shidi do it instead!”

“Shixiong, we are meant to do chores after this,” Shen Yuan cuts in before Binghe can reply, “but this one has not been assigned any yet, as this one’s bandages have only recently been removed. Could we not use that time instead? And surely Shizun would not mind if we trained in this one’s room.”

Ming Fan purses his lips. It tugs at his scar, a jagged line of red. That is something Shen Yuan doesn’t think he will ever grow used to. Ming Fan, scarred. Or anyone for that matter- and there are many now. He wonders if Airplane have new ones, too. Wherever he is.

“Can Yingying watch too?” Ning Yingying asks.

“Shijie has chores,” Binghe points out.

“Then so does A-Luo!”

“No,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan bites his lip to avoid laughing at how *smug* his best friend looks, “since this one was tasked with assisting Yuan, this one will be assigned chores when Yuan is.”

“That’s so unfair,” Ning Yingying whines, “this Shijie can assist as well! And sweeping is *boring.”*

Sweeping was also the easiest fucking job, but Shen Yuan doesn’t point that out. Ning Yingying will take it as a challenge, and then no one will dare to assign her any different chores anyway and then she will be *grumpy.*

“Perhaps Xiao-Shimei could help Chen-shimei with her chores?” Ming Fan suggests.

“Shouldn’t Chen Xiaoling be the Xiao-Shimei now?”

“A-Yuan is right, Shimei is *much* smaller than this one! Let her be Xiao-Shimei.”

“That’s- that is not what we are discussing,” Ming Fan says, flustered, “if Shen-shidi would ensure that he is assigned chores tomorrow, then yes, fine, we shall practice in private! *If* Luo-shidi does this one’s chores during that time.”

“What chores are those?” Shen Yuan asks, instantly suspicious.

Ming Fan does not usually do as many chores as the rest of them. Being a head disciple comes with some perks, after all. He still does *some* of them, but it has been years since he had to do something like laundry- a chore no one likes on a normal day, much less during the winter.

But the demon invasion has kept everyone busy. Shen Yuan has spotted Ming Fan sweeping stairs and hanging laundry whenever the guy wasn’t flying between peaks to deliver things or running after Shen Qingqiu. No one is left idling; even when Shen Yuan was injured, he had to help out wherever he could.

“Shidi will accompany Heng He until we are finished.”

They all pause and look towards Heng He, surrounded by all those children. He is wiping one child’s face clean while calmly telling another to use the spoon if they cannot handle chopsticks. The older Qiong Ding disciple opposite of him looks close to falling asleep.

“That’s it?” Shen Yuan asks, confused, “babysitting?”

He thought it would be something *bad.* Like… like waste disposal or some other horrifying thing. But watching children? Binghe is already good with Chen Xiaoling, and he might, possibly, be the one who herds Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying around the peak whenever they forget themselves. In Shen Yuan’s defense, *he* is reading and gathering knowledge. Ning Yingying is being Ning Yingying.

“That’s it? Shidi speaks as if it is not a difficult task!” Ming Fan squawks, “This Shixiong would like to see Shidi attempt to- to corral those little monsters! All they do is get into trouble. Why, most can’t even dress themselves! And they keep losing their *gloves.”*

“This Shidi will ensure no gloves are lost,” Binghe solemnly promises, “as long as Shixiong helps Yuan in private, and lets him eat now.”

Ming Fan huffs.

“As if *you* will be able to ensure that,” he grumbles, “but very well. Luo-shidi shall guide the… *children* until this one has finished taking care of Shen-shidi.” He says *children* the way most say *monsters.*

Shen Yuan thinks maybe he should be offended that they’re talking as if he’s not there. Or like he is some exotic creature in need of special care.

He would be offended, but he’s kind of busy trying to not drop his spoon as he returns to eating. And besides, Binghe looks proud of himself for managing to negotiate in Shen Yuan’s

favor. Lips curving upwards, a glimmer to his dark eyes as he sits nice and proper, jaw a little sharper than it was a year ago, and Shen Yuan's mouth feels dry.

So he swallows a mouthful of soup to chase it away.

"Deal," Binghe says.

Hopefully he and Binghe will be able to sneak away *after* the therapy.

Surely a moment will be found?

It should be easy! Everyone are too busy to pay anyone any mind, of course it will be easy to slip away, how could it *not* be–

"– then Shidi should be grateful! Shizun gave him a fan with *plum blossoms* painted on it. That is very fitting for a Qing Jing disciple, does Shidi not *know* how fitting it is? Truly, Shizun knows how to show his care even for the ungrateful! His patience is end- it's *almost* endless!"

"This one *is* grateful, and it is not mine yet! And endless? Shizun's patience is… is…"

As one, Ming Fan and Shen Yuan stop.

Before them is the bamboo house. There is the stone bench, piled high with snow, looking as if cushioned by the fluffiest pillow. There is the broom resting against the wall of the house, and the newly swept path before it, snow cradled in the cracks between the stone tiles. Icicles hang from the edges of the roof, thin, jagged points that glint in the sun.

There is also Liu Qingge.

The Bai Zhan Peak Lord stands before the door, arms crossed. He is clad in white and blue, black hair tied in a high ponytail. He is tense, glaring at the door as if it has wronged him. Perhaps Shen Qingqiu kicked him out already? If so, it is quite brave to linger.

A gust of wind blows past them, and Liu Qingge's hair flows with it. He looks very majestic. Shen Yuan has the sudden urge to kick him in the shin.

He doesn't. Obviously. That would be suicidal.

"Shishu!" Ming Fan gasps, and then turns bright red when Liu Qingge's glare snaps to them, one hand dropping to his sword, "this one greets Shishu!" Ming Fan hurries to say, offering a respectful bow.

He doesn't seem to mind giving Shen Yuan's shin a kick when Shen Yuan is too slow to copy him.

"This one greets Shishu," Shen Yuan parrots, bowing as well. When he looks up, Liu Qingge's eyes are on him. It is still a glare, the kind that is far too sharp. Shen Yuan flexes his fingers, and then tucks them into his sleeves, hiding them from sight. Ming Fan moves forward, his eyes bright as he opens his mouth.

"You are Shen Qingqiu's bastard," Liu Qingge bluntly says.

Ming Fan falters, smile fading, the rosy flush of his cheeks quickly paling. Shen Yuan knows that kind of gossip is *everywhere* within the sect, obviously. He also knows, as does Ming Fan, that Shen Qingqiu absolutely hates hearing it and punishes those who spread it.

"Shizun has not claimed such a relation," Shen Yuan replies, darting his eyes towards the window. The sun shines against it in such a way he can't see through it, but he finds himself hoping that Shen Qingqiu isn't home. He knows better, of course. Ming Fan had made it clear that the man was in the house at this hour.

Liu Qingge scoffs with disgust.

"May this lowly one ask why Shishu is visiting?" Ming Fan blurts out, "not that this one has any right to question such a visit! Only, Liu-shishu must be very busy! Can this one be of service?"

Nice save!!! Go Shixiong!!!

"No," Liu Qingge replies, and Ming Fan wilts. "I'm only here to speak with Shen Qingqiu. Leave."

The door opens.

"How daring of Shidi to order this one's disciples around," Shen Qingqiu says, standing in the doorway like a wraith in green, black strands of hair fluttering in the wind as it sweeps past.

He smiles at Liu Qingge, though it is generous to call it a smile at all. It looks the way ice feels. There is a fan in his hand, a cluster of pine trees painted over it, and he idly fans himself with it, as if the air is not cold with winter.

Perhaps it isn't to him.

"Especially," Shen Qingqiu continues, "when he is on *my* peak. Does this mean this master can visit Bai Zhan Peak and order the disciples to learn how to behave like civilized beings?" The smile widens. "They seem to lack *guidance,* after all."

Liu Qingge's mouth twists; Shen Yuan's eyes dart between them. He can't help but hold his breath. Can't help but stand still, only moving a step closer towards Ming Fan before he does his best impression of a statue.

"Your disciples do not need to be here," Liu Qingge says, "I'm here to speak with *you."*

Every word is a silent burst of shock. Shen Yuan didn't expect much from Liu Qingge. The man didn't ever show up in the original story, and the most interaction he has had with the Peak Lord is that one time, years ago now, when he kicked Binghe in the face and Shen Yuan did his very best to bite through skin. There is no reason for him to expect some kind of- of *politeness,* and yet he did.

Perhaps he expected better because of Liu Mingyan. He has been around her many times, though they have rarely spoken when they have met. She had been busy visiting their library, for of course she enjoyed perusing the tomes within Qing Jing Peak. It was *Liu Mingyan.* She was always cordial, always graceful and polite and spoke in soft yet clear syllables, like spring water coming to life.

Liu Qingge is cool, of course. He is a Bai Zhan Peak Lord.

But *damn* is he a rude bitch.

Shen Qingqiu looks deeply unimpressed, though perhaps it is worse than that. His eyebrow has a suspicious twitch to it, and Shen Yuan considers if he should just cut his losses and leave before shit goes down. Ming Fan seems to be thinking along the same lines.

"They were called here," Shen Qingqiu says, as if it's true and not a blatant lie, as if they hadn't decided without telling him beforehand, "while Shidi was not. Unlike Shidi, this one has duties to attend to."

"You have been avoiding me," Liu Qingge snaps, stepping closer, his hand still on the pommel of his sword but now his fingers tighten around it and he looks ready to wield it, "do not act like a coward! We will speak *now,* Shen Qingqiu!"

Shen Qingqiu's eyes flick towards the sword.

When they once again meet Liu Qingge's eyes, there is something *sharp* in them. Sharper than normal. Or perhaps it is the way he holds himself now; a viper considering the strength of the venom in its fangs.

The fan in his hand can be deadly if needed. His cultivation is higher than ever before from

the Ling Xi Caves. There are two swords in his sash, and Xiu Ya is powerful. These are things Shen Yuan knows.

Shen Yuan has never seen Liu Qingge fight. The man is called War God and he is the Lord of Bai Zhan Peak, and that alone should say enough. But he thinks that maybe, just maybe, Shen Qingqiu would attack before the man could. Honor does not matter if one is to *win,* after all. That is what made the Scum Villain into *scum.*

Intent does not matter, results do.

The air is cold. Shen Yuan breathes it, and it settles in his lungs and clings to his throat. His fingers tingle, his palms *itch* with heat, and he knows that Shang Qinghua said that Shen Qingqiu never *intended* to kill Liu Qingge, but everyone in the sect knows how much they hate each other. Mu Qingfang and Wei Qingwei and even Yue Qingyuan have dropped enough hints of it, and the stillness in the air reminds Shen Yuan of long nails and golden bells before a temper snaps and he is suddenly terribly aware that they are *Peak Lords.*

And then Shen Qingqiu's eyes briefly look towards them, and Shen Yuan stares back, frozen stiff where he stands.

When he blinks, the stance has softened into something *less.*

Liu Qingge stands before them, his face wary, his hand still on his sword. But the tension has been cut, and none of them seem to know what to do with it. No one but Shen Qingqiu.

"Inside," he orders, and when Liu Qingge walks up, Shen Qingqiu sneers and stops him with the point of his fan pressed against the man's chest. "Not *you,"* and green eyes glare at Ming Fan and Shen Yuan, still standing frozen.

They nearly trip over themselves in their hurry to obey.

The door is slammed shut behind them.

Shen Yuan and Ming Fan look at each other for a long moment; and then Shen Yuan whirls around to kneel and press his ear to the door, right by the thin gap near the bottom. He ignores the outraged sound of Ming Fan choking down protests, straining to hear what is happening. When the older teenager tries to grab at him, Shen Yuan swats his hands away.

"Shidi," Ming Fan hissed as he kneels down next to him, "this is *so rude."*

"I just want to make sure they don't kill each other," Shen Yuan hisses back, "please shut up so I can listen."

Ming Fan's face turns bright red from choking on every rude word he no doubt wants to spout, face screwing up with it. The only reason he hasn't begun yelling is probably because he doesn't want Shen Qingqiu to yell at him in turn. Shen Yuan doesn't care; he is far more focused on eavesdropping, thanks.

"–draw Hong Jing!" Liu Qingge's voice snaps.

"Shidi is being ridiculous. What reason is there for this one to do so?" Shen Qingqiu returns, and even through the door, his voice is sharp, "is that all that Shidi has come for? To demand this one performs a test?" He scoffs. "Did Shidi forget to bring this up at the latest meeting? How forgetful of him!"

"Your attempts at avoiding it are only more suspicious. If you do not agree, I *will* bring this to the Sect Leader's attention!"

"The reason you haven't done it already speaks for itself."

"If you have truly redeemed yourself, then this should be a small task, and not one we need to ask the others to oversee. If you disagree, it only proves that I'm right."

"You're *right?* Shidi has never been capable of solving anything without using his sword. What insanity is it that he believes is happening, to dare order his Shixiong to go and pull at a damn sword?"

"Hong Jing will reveal the truth."

"Hong Jing only reveals *possession."*

Shen Yuan blinks; next to him, Ming Fan's gasps from where he is also listening. Their eyes briefly meet.

Hong Jing is a famous sword of Cang Qiong Mountain. Shen Yuan has seen it himself, several times now thanks to Wei Qingwei. A blade that is claimed to be bright red, though he has never been witness to that. It only unsheathes itself in the presence of demonic qi; of evil possession.

In the original, it had unsheathed itself in Luo Binghe's presence.

But why the fuck would Liu Qingge want *Shen Qingqiu* to draw it?

"Ah," Shen Qingqiu says, breaking the tense silence which had fallen outside. The small sound speaks of revelation, of a discovery that tastes bitter but is not surprising. It is not disappointment; only grim acceptance. "Shidi believes this one to be possessed."

"It is obvious."

"Shidi's mind is *truly* unfathomable. We have been in this sect for years, and yet this is the first time that he has accused this one of such a thing. How fascinating. This one thought Shidi was incapable of creativity, but look at you now. Coming up with new ideas."

Every word drips with condescension. Shen Yuan's heart is beating fast in his chest, expecting to hear the sound of a sword being unsheathed.

“There is no other explanation,” Liu Qingge insists, and who is digging their grave deeper? Shen Qingqiu or Liu Qingge? Whose shovel is Shen Yuan meant to snatch away? “Your behavior in the caves is nothing like what the true Shen Qingqiu would do.”

“My behavior? And what was *that?* Saving Shidi from his own idiocy? Beating sense into his empty skull, for surely there are no thoughts to find within it! I stopped you from qi deviation and *death,* and yet this is the thanks this one gets? Fool!”

“Yes!”

“So Shidi agrees he’s a *fool?”*

“No,” Liu Qingge snaps, “but you saved me, and that is not something you do! You are a dishonorable scum, and nothing more! And you keep avoiding Hong Jing, which means I’m right in my suspicions!”

“The truth is that Shid is embarrassed that he was saved by someone so filthy and dishonorable as this one,” Shen Qingqiu hisses back, “that he was weak enough to require saving! Now he wishes to hide it before anyone else can find out that he is *weak,* and you try to hide it behind your precious honor.”

“So prove me wrong! Go to Wan Jian Peak! I shall escort you to ensure you cannot run!”

“I’m not going to let some brute order me around, like some *servant–”*

There is the sound of something breaking. The sound is muffled through the door, barely audible, but it still sends white-hot panic through him.

“Shizun!” he blurts out as he slams the door open, oblivious to how Ming Fan tries to yank him back inside.

Only to come to a stop.

Liu Qingge has grabbed at Shen Qingqiu’s robes, their faces too close to each other. Shen Qingqiu’s lips are thin with rage in comparison to the angry flush painted across Liu Qingge’s cheeks, and there is the glint of a thin knife between his fingers, too close to Liu Qingge’s side. That image alone is enough to stop anyone in their tracks.

But it is the sight of the man behind them that made Shen Yuan stop. Brown hair in a bun, arms overfull with all manner of things, and the broken shards of a jar by his feet.

Shang Qinghua’s smile is nervous as he looks between them.

“Did this one come at a bad time?” he asks.

Liu Qingge lets go of Shen Qingqiu; Shen Qingqiu shoves him away with a snarl and Shen Yuan can’t help the giddy smile that breaks across his face. He *knows* he shouldn’t, that it is terribly suspicious, but it’s impossible to not smile. Because Shang Qinghua looks fine. There

are no visible injuries, and Shen Yuan hadn't even realized how much he had worried about him until just then.

Shang Qinghua catches his eye; the nervous smile seems tinged with relief, and Shen Yuan makes a stupid little wave. He wonders what Shang Qinghua has heard about what happened. He wonders how the guy's mission went. He wonders–

Shen Qingqiu steps between them.

"Liu-shidi was just leaving," he says, voice cool and aloof, as if he and Liu Qingge were not just seconds away from tearing each other apart, "Ming Fan, take the child inside while this master speaks with Shang-shidi."

"Yes Shizun!"

Shen Yuan doesn't even fight it. He lets Ming Fan drag him back inside, only catching a last glimpse of Shang Qinghua cowering between Liu Qingge *and* Shen Qingqiu, clearly about to be used as a tiebreaker in their stupid argument. As if the easiest solution wasn't to just go and grab Hong Jing.

"Why did seeing Shang-shishu make you so happy?" Ming Fan huffs as they sit down, and Shen Yuan shrugs.

He still can't stop smiling.

"Just happy someone stopped them," he says, and it's only half a lie.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: Idiot says What
LQG: What?
SQQ: heh.

SY, later that night: FUCK
LBH: what??? What is it???
SY: *I forgot Shibo!!!*
LBH: oh D:

Hello! *waves* chapter was late after all, and yet I barely got to play my game. Oopsie! Sometimes life throws curve-balls at you <_<
Also anyone who has been around small children, we all know those kids find MF's outrage hilarious and they are 100% losing their gloves on purpose whenever he is on babysitting duty. I love kids. They're evil comedians and I think that is great <3

Thank you as always for being so patient with me! I know I said this is wrapping up before a timeskip, and I swear it's approaching!!! I promise!! I'm not a liar <_<

Fanart~ <3

Dera-eclipse drew the snowball scene of last chapter :D

doe3draws3 drew BingYuan on post it notes!!! So cute <3

theimpurelily has drawn three beautiful artworks! the last one is animated :0

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan's hands hurt.

He foolishly believed they wouldn't. Not *this much* at least. For a brief, blissful moment of his life, Shen Yuan had imagined therapy would be boring but helpful and even healing. He had happily suppressed the memory of the exercises he had to do with his leg when *that* was fucked up. Ignorance is bliss. Forgetfulness is a blessing.

Somehow, he thinks they hurt more *now* than when the damn demon first stomped on him. Shen Yuan sits on the floor, slumped over Binghe's bed and does not move as Ming Fan fussily packs up and leaves, bringing with him the various tools he had brought- mostly balls of various sizes and squishiness.

Instruments of torture has never looked so benign.

Shen Yuan hopes not every session takes so long. He suspects this time it took ages because Ming Fan was scared to leave. Not that he can blame him! After all, the, uh, the argument outside had gotten pretty loud and intense. As it was, Shen Yuan is *reasonably* certain that no one got maimed. If Airplane had gotten injured, he hoped the man would have been screaming over it.

He sighs and burrows his face into the bed. The blanket is soft. It kind of smells like Binghe, but also it does not. He thinks about how some homes smell differently; an inherent *scent* that belongs to that place, to the people who live there. It makes sense if Binghe's scent isn't that strong to him.

They are always together, after all. They probably share it. Or their scents are similar enough from the proximity that it is hard to differentiate it.

Shen Yuan flexes his fingers and grimaces at the sting in them. The ache is bone deep and awful, and he *swears* his hands weren't this red before. With an effort, he braces himself and gets back up, shaking out the tingles in his hand and wrist as he stands.

There is a slam outside; he jumps. Shen Yuan holds his breath as he listens, wondering if perhaps he was mistaken. Maybe there *is* a fight, and Liu Qingge and Shang Qinghua are *still* there, but now inside and–

The sound of a snarled curse and another door slamming shut has an absurdly calming effect. It's just Shen Qingqiu. The man would never act like that where the other peak lords could see. Hell, he might even have forgotten that Shen Yuan is still inside. Honestly it's surprising that he isn't just breaking shit.

Not that Shen Yuan has ever seen him do that, but, well. The argument between him and Liu Qingge had been intense. If Binghe was in the house, maybe he would be more worried, but he remembers the moment before Shen Qingqiu left for the caves. It's still vivid, even a year later. The sound of the fruit falling with a splat to the floor. The stain it had left on Shen Qingqiu's robes.

The utter lack of punishment.

… still, Shen Qingqiu sounds *really* fucking pissed off.

As Shen Yuan considers the window and the temptation to use it as an escape and how useful his hands will be for it, he can hear a door slam once again. And then the door behind him slams open as well, and Shen Yuan squawks as he whirls around to face a livid Shen Qingqiu.

There are bright red spots of anger on his sharp cheekbones; other than that, he almost looks calm. If very angrily so.

He glares, and Shen Yuan stands frozen, hands awkwardly held out by his side, unsure of where to put them.

"Why," the man hisses, "did you wave at that *pest?"*

Shen Yuan blinks, confused.

"Does Shizun mean Shang-shishu?"

"Obviously."

"Well. Um. Shizun *could* have meant Liu-shishu, so-"

"Answer the question, Shen Yuan."

Shen Yuan wants to turn back to the window. However, that would turn his back to Shen Qingqiu, which seems like an absolutely terrible idea.

"Should this one not show respect to Shishu?" he tries.

Shen Qingqiu looks wholly unimpressed. He looks like he expected a better reason, and Shen Yuan winces at it.

"Not that one," Shen Qingqiu says derisively, "if any of them at all. They are all idiots and are to be treated with the barest amount of respect when required. However, disciple Shen has shown a *fondness* for Shang Qinghua. This master demands to know why."

There is no right answer.

Shen Yuan looks at Shen Qingqiu, and he knows this. No matter what he says, Shen Qingqiu won't like it. The only question is where he will aim his ire; at Shen Yuan, or Shang Qinghua.

One of them has a higher chance of survival. The other one will be buried in a ditch before nightfall.

He clears his throat.

“Shang-shishu is clumsy,” he says, “Mu-shishu allowed this one to practice healing cultivation on Shang-shishu while Shizun was gone. With supervision!” Mostly. Mu Qingfang had quickly realized that Airplane would be easier to heal if left alone with Shen Yuan, and had been willing to not ask why. Probably because Shang Qinghua was as slippery as an anxious weasel when cornered and twice as difficult to heal because of it.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes sharpen.

“Healing cultivation?” he says. “That is what disciple Shen has been practicing the past year? Qian Cao Peak’s techniques?”

His voice is dangerously low.

Oh.

Oh shit, okay, so. Shen Yuan *had* been willing to bite the bullet.

Now he wants a refund.

“... Mu-shishu said this one had talent for it, and since this one could not join on night hunts…” he mumbles.

“So does disciple Shen plan to run off then?”

How far away was the window again? Like, within leap distance? Could Shen Yuan just… bust through it? Before Shen Qingqiu got to him? He dares not glance at it, in case Shen Qingqiu figures out his plans.

“To where, Shizun?”

“Qian Cao Peak. Unless disciple Shen planned to go to *An Ding?”* Shen Qingqiu hisses the last one the way one might imagine a twin-headed cobra would hiss before it ate your soul.

Shen Yuan would pick the cobra.

“An Ding Peak is very useful,” he feebly protests.

“It’s a peak of servants,” Shen Qingqiu hisses, and Shen Yuan half expects his robes to flare up like a cobra’s mantle, which would arguably look very cool if not also horrifying, “did we not have this discussion last night? This master is *not* allowing his disciple to act like a servant. Disciple Shen is not to ever entertain such idiotic ideas. As such, he will *not* speak with Shang Qinghua without this master’s presence.”

Perhaps the man sees how Shen Yuan wants to argue about it. Perhaps he sees that Shen Yuan won't obey, because how *could he?* It's Airplane! They need to meet, to strategize, to talk about the future that no one else can know about! He *can't* stay away.

Whatever Shen Qingqiu sees, he clearly disapproves of it.

"You," the man says, "are not to leave this master's side."

Shen Yuan startles.

"What? But Shizun-"

"Disciple Shen *will* stick to this master's side or he will be punished. Is that clear?"

Shen Yuan flushes bright red, mortified. Shen Qingqiu says it in such a way that reminds him of being scolded in a store, being told to hold his mother's hand if he can't be bothered to behave. It makes him feel like a snotty child, even though he is fifteen by now. In this world, fifteen is more adult than not. Fifteen is two years shy of marriage age, a fact that Shen Yuan normally tries to not think too much about but now wants to shove in Shen Qingqiu's face.

"This one is not a child," he mumbles, nails digging into his palms.

"You have the mind of one," Shen Qingqiu scoffs, and then he snaps his fan open and turns away. "Follow."

Shen Yuan looks towards the window.

"Now, Shen Yuan."

"Yes, Shizun," he grits out, and does as told.

Like a dog.

Qiong Ding Peak is a crowded place.

There are too many buildings, too much useless *comfort.* Whatever open land there is has been reduced to space that is more for *walking* than for training. Nothing is ever too steep, the stairs easy and short. Benches to rest on, pavilions to hide under when the sun shines too bright or the rain falls. All to ensure that non-cultivating guests won't be offended, that they will not hurt or sully themselves as they strut around, despite non-cultivators having little reason to visit a cultivation sect.

No other reason than to brag about the glory of it, as if it is a little trinket to buy at a stall.

It is nothing like Bai Zhan Peak, where everything has a function. Their buildings are simple, their land is used to grow stronger. The cliffs are sharp enough to cut those who climb it. It does not pretend to be polite. It is what it is, no deceit to be found.

Liu Qingge does not spare a glance at the long line of people he passes as he marches through the hall, gaze set on the door which leads to the sect leader's office. A myriad of colors line the hall; cultivators of the different peaks sidling alongside each other, all with the goal to bother their sect leader.

If it was urgent, they would not wait in line.

Liu Qingge slams open the door; inside, a man wearing steel gray jumps.

Yue Qingyuan doesn't twitch.

"Out," Liu Qingge snaps, for his words are too important to be heard by the untested. He does not know this man's face nor name, only that he is one of Tang Qingling's people. Their beasts can wait.

The man falters. For a moment, he appears foolish enough to argue. And then he remembers himself and he remembers Liu Qingge's lack of patience for fools, and is quick to obey. The door closes behind him; the arrays carved into the frame of it glows before they fall dull, once again active. None will hear a word from the outside.

"Shidi," Yue Qingyuan says chidingly, and Liu Qingge turns to meet his eyes. Dark brown, warm, fearless. Yue Qingyuan has never been one to show fear of him, not even before they were head disciples. It is why he is at times the only one worth respecting.

"Zhangmen-shixiong," Liu Qingge greets, and looks at his face. He frowns. "You are tired. When did you last rest?"

Yue Qingyuan smiles.

"Shidi did not barge in to tell me that," he replies, "does he have time to sit down, or is it something that requires us to leave?"

"Do you *want* to leave?" Liu Qingge returns, and Yue Qingyuan's smile turns wry.

"I don't have the time for it," he says. It is answer enough.

For a moment, Liu Qingge considers dragging him out of the office. It is too big to be so stifling, and yet it succeeds at it. The desk is heavy with work. The walls are decorated by art which Yue Qingyuan did not place. It is a cage of responsibilities, an honorable thing that only Yue Qingyuan can shoulder, the only one trusted to oversee their sect, the wellbeing of all who live within it. It is important work. They do not need to leave for what Liu Qingge is

there for. And yet, he is tempted to say that they do- if only because Yue Qingyuan looks in dire need of fresh air. Perhaps a spar, if one were to push.

But it would be a lie. Unlike *some,* Liu Qingge does not lie.

“I want Shen Qingqiu to draw Hong Jing,” he says instead.

Yue Qingyuan blinks at him.

“Shidi wishes for… Shen Qingqiu to draw Hong Jing,” he slowly repeats.

“Yes.”

“May this Shixiong ask *why?”*

“He has been possessed.”

Yue Qingyuan’s posture had already been perfect. Now it shifts, intent. His eyes have grown sharper at the possible threat. Good.

“Shidi is certain?”

“He is not acting like himself,” Liu Qingge explains, “and when I tell him to draw Hong Jing to prove his innocence, he refuses. Whatever is possessing him, it is trying to avoid detection.”

“In what ways is he behaving differently?” Yue Qingyuan asks, standing up in a smooth motion. He rests his hand against where Xuan Su is displayed; not yet picking it up, but ready to do so. “Can Shidi describe it?”

Liu Qingge opens his mouth.

He closes it.

Yue Qingyuan considers him, and Liu Qingge grits his teeth, feeling his face grow warmer as the words fail to appear. There is the memory of the caves; the long tunnels and carved out pockets to cultivate in. Blood splattered against walls where those who failed used to reside, a reminder to not push too far, a reminder his own Shizun had failed to heed and a reminder which he knows many cultivators forget.

He remembers his own blood staining those walls.

Red against white robes, and Shen Qingqiu’s voice as Liu Qingge–

“Shidi?” Yue Qingyuan coaxes, and Liu Qingge twitches. He failed to notice the man coming closer. A furrow between his brows, a hand settling on his upper arm. A squeeze, to ground him. Xuan Su is still in its display.

Liu Qingge exhales.

“He… *saved me,”* he forces out, “within the Ling Xi caves. The real Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t. And the way he acted during the demon attack. Despite refusing to claim the bastard child as his own, he protected him as if he had.”

Yue Qingyuan looks at him for a long moment. Liu Qingge flexes his fingers, waiting.

“Shen Yuan is not Shen Qingqiu’s bastard,” Yue Qingyuan finally says. Before Liu Qingge can protest the obvious lie, he continues, “until Shen Qingqiu claims a relation, there *is* no relation. None other than that of a Master and his disciple. Which is a respected bond.”

Liu Qingge scowls.

Yue Qingyuan smiles, and gives his arm a pat before he steps back.

“And I believe Qingqiu-shidi would save any of his sect siblings if needed. Even those who he has quarreled with.”

To this, Liu Qingge scoffs. He remembers more than one mission where the man had tried to backstab him; not to speak of all the times he cheated during spars, during tournaments where they were paired against each other. The man is as dishonorable as they come.

“If that is true, then he should have no issue with drawing Hong Jing,” Liu Qingge insists, following as Yue Qingyuan returns to his desk. The tea is cold. Unlike the previous sect leader, Yue Qingyuan has no servants to make a new batch. “If Shixiong makes it an order, he cannot refuse it.”

“When this one has time, I will ask if he is willing. But I trust him.”

Liu Qingge clenches his fists.

“I don’t understand *why,”* he says, because he never has. Shen Qingqiu has never shown respect to Yue Qingyuan. He has always been *apart,* in a way that even Liu Qingge fails to be, despite the fact that only one of them often leaves the sect. Shen Qingqiu is always there, and he is always picking fights, causing unrest.

And still Yue Qingyuan insists on trusting him.

“Neither does he,” Yue Qingyuan replies, in a tone that Liu Qingge cannot read. “Is there anything else, Shidi?”

Liu Qingge huffs.

“I will make you new tea,” he says. “Remember to drink it.”

Yue Qingyuan’s smile is quick and fond.

“Thank you, Qingge.”

Liu Qingge turns away before his face grows warm.

When it is time for the evening patrol, Shen Yuan is spared.

Apparently the man trusts him to not run off after dark, when the wind is howling and the scattered bits of ice and snow become spikes of pain in one’s skin. That, or Shen Qingqiu grew sick and tired of his company as he dragged Shen Yuan around the peak the whole day, and decided he could finally be excused. Or maybe the man has a headache from Ning Yingying, who was *also* snatched and forced to follow upon being found sweeping the stairs by the baths.

That last one is more of a hopeful wish; Shen Qingqiu had seemed very pleased with having Ning Yingying chattering up a storm, her walk a bouncing ball to Shen Yuan’s dragging feet. The sharp tilt to Shen Qingqiu’s body had softened, and he had hummed in response to Ning Yingying’s words.

Shen Yuan wonders what Shen Qingqiu would have said, if he knew that Ning Yingying’s gloves hid bruised knuckles and cuts from mishaps in carving wood. Maybe then Shen Yuan wouldn’t be the only one dragged around like some misbehaving dog on a *leash.*

It doesn’t matter; Ning Yingying is back in the dormitories, and Shen Qingqiu never found out. And now Shen Yuan gets to stay indoors where it is nice and warm while the man stubbornly goes out into what’s almost a snow storm. *And* he is alone with Binghe. Win-win!

Shen Yuan sits down on Binghe’s bed and holds out his hands.

“Did Yuan hurt himself?” Binghe asks and takes Shen Yuan’s hands into his own. His touch is gentle, dark eyes focused as he looks them over in the candlelight. Binghe’s thumb presses lightly against one palm, right near Shen Yuan’s thumb. It twinges just a bit.

“Not really,” he admits, “but could Binghe massage my hands? Ming Fan was supposed to do it, but he was distracted.” And Shen Yuan had seen no reason to remind him. The idea of Ming Fan massaging him had felt weird. And with Ming Fan so eager to escape once the fighting outside had settled…

Shen Qingqiu is just being ridiculous; Binghe gives *excellent* hand massages. He is a natural, as is proper of the protagonist. His hands are warm, his touch is steady. Shen Yuan wonders if he often massaged his mother’s hands. It would make sense, would it not?

“Of course,” his friend agrees, and Shen Yuan smiles.

He sits there. Hand aching, but slowly the muscles relax as Binghe works. Outside, the wind is loud enough that it feels like the whole house is in danger of being swept away. Binghe’s eyes glimmer in the candle light, and his hair hangs loose. Thick curls that shift and slide over his shoulders whenever he tilts his head, looking soft to the touch. Shen Yuan flexes the fingers in his other hand.

Would it count as therapy, to braid Binghe’s hair?

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan begins. Stops.

“Yuan,” his friend replies, looking up, his smile soft and a little sleepy. Binghe worked hard, after all. The little penguins of Qiong Ding Peak tried their best to cause trouble. There is a barely visible scratch, right there on Binghe’s cheek, from when one of the smaller children accidentally smacked him with a stick. Shen Yuan wants to touch it. Press his hand against it, cradle it before he heals it.

The thought makes him feel oddly warm.

“Is Meng Mo here?” Shen Yuan blurts out.

Luo Binghe blinks at him. His hand stills.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Well. Is- is he here? Can Meng Mo hear me, right now? Is he talking to you? Should *I* talk to *him?”* Shen Yuan wonders, looking away from Binghe’s cheek, from that thin, red line curving alongside it. “Or is it a dream thing only?”

From the corner of his eye, he sees Binghe frown.

“I don’t want to relay his words to Yuan,” he says, suddenly mullish. “Yuan should not worry. Meng Mo won’t speak to him again.”

“I’m not worrying,” Shen Yuan protests, looking back at Binghe again, fingers curling against Binghe’s, “I’m curious! How many times will I be able to speak with a demon like this? I mean, sure, there must be *some* who are friendly, but they will just see a scary cultivator and it won’t be for *forever* until I get out there. But Meng Mo is right here!”

Binghe huffs.

“I’m a demon,” he says, squeezing Shen Yuan’s hand in his, and there is a wobble in his voice as he says it, reluctant and slow. But Binghe stubbornly pushes on, “does Yuan not like talking with me?”

“Of course I do! Binghe knows this. But you’re not *a* demon,” Shen Yuan points out, “you’re *part* demon. That’s not the same thing.”

This time, Binghe's frown disappears. Instead he stares at Shen Yuan as if he said something shocking and not the simple truth. It goes on long enough that Shen Yuan wonders if he should speak up.

"... wait," Binghe then says and narrows his eyes, "is Yuan saying he would like it more if I was a full-blooded demon?"

Of course not. What made Binghe cool was not just his *blood.* But also, the unique combination of a cultivator's meridians and a demon's inherent cultivation was what made Luo Binghe the OP protagonist in the future. If there were any pure blood heavenly demons left, Shen Yuan had full faith that his best friend would kick their asses.

Though his best friend was being a little too serious.
How could he not tease him?

"Wellllllll," Shen Yuan says, drawing the word out, as if truly considering it. Binghe pouts, tugging his hand closer, and Shen Yuan lets him as he continues, "I'm just *saying…"*

"Yuan!" Binghe whines.

Shen Yuan laughs. And then he laughs harder as Binghe groans, slumping over, pressing his face against Shen Yuan's shoulder. It muffles his grumbles into nonsense.

When Shen Yuan pats his head, the hair is just as soft as he remembers it.

"Sorry," he laughs, and rubs his cheek against Binghe's head, "of course Binghe is the best, whether he is human, demon or only *part* demon."

"What do you mean *only,"* Binghe mutters. But Shen Yuan can hear the smile in his voice, so he only laughs again and hugs his best friend closer. One arm around him, his other hand still being held by Binghe. It feels warm and tingly. "I think part demon is too much demon," his friend then adds.

Shen Yuan gives his hair a reprimanding tug. Binghe swats at him for it, and Shen Yuan swats back until his friend leans away and catches that hand, abandoning the other one to once again offer a massage.

"... but is he listening right now?" Shen Yuan asks after a moment.

"Sometimes," Binghe reluctantly replies, pressing down in a spot that makes Shen Yuan's fingers twitch, "of what he has told me, he can't listen in much yet, but it will become more common later."

When Binghe had grown stronger and, in turn, Meng Mo had as well. Just like the original.

"So he mostly speaks in dreams now? Can I join?"

Luo Binghe sighs, but his lips twitch up into a smile.

“I’ll ask,” he says, which is *practically* yes.

Shen Yuan hums. Outside, the wind continues to howl.

“There is a peak lord meeting tomorrow,” he abruptly says, “do you think we could go to Qiong Ding Peak then?”

“Would Zhangmen-shibo not be at the meeting?”

“Well, yeah. But we can hide out in his office or something,” Shen Yuan reasons, “or I could show Binghe the room I stay in! Stayed, I mean.” Because he wouldn’t be switching between peaks anymore.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about that. He hadn’t really thought about it.

“Maybe we can visit Qian Cao Peak as well,” Shen Yuan slowly says, “just to say hi to Mu-shishu. Once he is back from the meeting.” There hadn’t been much time to actually talk, since the invasion.

“... does Yuan miss living there?” Binghe wonders.

“A little. I mean- obviously staying with Binghe is the best, and I love Qing Jing Peak. But…” He had stayed there so often. There had been sleepy breakfasts around a shared table, Mu Qingfang’s voice calm and even as he explained the different properties of qi infused tea, how some could boost your health and others could reveal blood relations if done right, or tea that could change your gender if you consumed it often enough. He had even explained what he was doing whenever he helped cycling Shen Yuan’s meridians. And Wei Qingwei’s bad jokes, still told when he was teaching how to do knife tricks, the whetstone he had given Shen Yuan even now resting on the table by his bed–

Yeah, maybe he missed them. Just a bit.

“Once I have Fu Yue back, I’ll visit them more often,” he decides, “them and Shang Qinghua.”

Binghe frowns.

“Don’t be like Shizun,” Shen Yuan scolds, and Binghe’s frown deepens, “I don’t even get why you both dislike him so much. It’s silly.” Okay, maybe it was because Airplane had a distinctly *shifty* air to him, but whatever. “Oh, did I tell Binghe about how Liu Qingge was here as well? He wanted to make Shizun draw Hong Jing.”

“So much happened while I was gone,” Binghe says, bemused, “why would he want Shizun to do that? It reveals possession, does it not? And he hasn’t left the sect since the attack.”

“Apparently Shizun has been *too nice.”*

A moment of silence.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Really.”

“Yeah!”

“When would he become possessed?” Binghe asks, clearly as bewildered as Shen Yuan felt, “in the Ling Xi caves? Is that possible?”

“Mu-shishu has mentioned qi deviations can happen there,” Shen Yuan admits, “and qi deviations can be deadly. So there *might* be ghosts in there? But I imagine someone checks for that before anyone enters seclusion, so it’s not likely.”

“Too nice,” Luo Binghe says.

“Too nice,” Shen Yuan nods. “That’s Shizun.”

They both think back to the *lesson.* There had been a lot of smacking them with the fan. Shen Yuan’s fingers twitch at the memory, and he realizes Binghe finished massaging. That he has been holding Shen Yuan’s hand, just like that.

He swallows and tugs his hand back, feeling oddly flustered about it.

“A-Anyway,” he says, fumbling for the fan, hands warm and fingers clumsy as he unfolds it, plum blossoms on display, “so is Binghe fine with going to Qiong Ding tomorrow?”

“We will be caught,” Binghe says, hands resting in his lap, fingers curling inwards.

“Not if A-Ying distracts Shizun when he returns,” Shen Yuan points out, pushing and pulling on the fan with two fingers, fighting the absurd urge to hide his face with it.

Luo Binghe seems to consider his words; eyes tracking the way the plum blossoms disappear and reappear.

“How would she do that?” he finally asks.

Shen Yuan folds the fan a final time.

“I have an idea.”

Zheng Yang is a beautiful blade.

The way it glints in the sun; Shen Yuan imagines it is a little brighter than a sword normally is. It catches that golden light in such a way that it almost looks like it *drips* with sunshine. When he presses a finger against the handle, he feels warm tendrils of approval and giddy joy.

“So how should I stand?” he asks, tucking his hands into his sleeves. They are both wearing gloves, but it is windy. Not as much as the night before, but enough that their cheeks are flushed from the sting of the cold wind blowing past.

In the distance, there are pieces of the bridge. Slowly being reconstructed, one gleaming piece at a time. If one has good enough qinggong, perhaps they could bounce between them like it was a particularly difficult platform game.

But neither of them can do that yet. So, sword flying it is.

“How are Yuan’s hands?” Binghe asks, stepping up onto his sword. Shen Yuan tilts his head back to meet his eyes, and smiles when Binghe slowly sinks further down, all the way until Zheng Yang is just barely staying above the snow covered ground. By the end of it, Shen Yuan is once more the taller one.

Binghe *is* gaining on him. He is definitely taller than Ning Yingying now; it had been a fierce competition. But he is still shorter than Shen Yuan.

“Not sure,” he admits, and looks down at said hands. He flexes his fingers, but it’s difficult. Could be the gloves, could be the hands. “Should I stand in front maybe? Oh, but would Binghe be able to see?” Shen Yuan gestures at their height difference. “When *will* Binghe grow? You’re supposed to be taller than me,” he says, the words slipping out.

But his friends do not seem to find it odd; smiles, just a little too cheeky, and shrugs as he holds out a hand for Shen Yuan to take.

“Yuan has always been the tallest,” Binghe replies, “how could I surpass him in that?”

Shen Yuan huffs and accepts the hand; steps up, Binghe at his back.

“Does Binghe not want to grow taller? What if I make fun of your height forever and ever?” he asks, voice cracking embarrassingly when Binghe curls one arm around Shen Yuan’s waist.

Stupid puberty.

“As long as Yuan is there to make fun of me, I don’t mind,” his friend replies, as if it’s a perfectly normal thing to say. Shen Yuan’s face feels warm. Thankfully Binghe can’t see it.

“... does Yuan think I’ll be taller?”

“Um. Maybe?” he mumbles, because *surely* Binghe will outgrow him one day. It feels weird, the idea of being the taller one. Isn’t the protagonist always the tallest? “A-Anyway. Off we go!”

“Off we go,” Binghe agrees as he tucks his chin over Shen Yuan’s shoulder.

To see better, of course.

The best way to be sneaky is to pretend you are meant to be there.

They land on Qiong Ding Peak, Zheng Yang sheathing itself with a flick of a finger. Shen Yuan’s face is warm from the wind and nothing else, and Binghe’s cheeks are pink from it as well.

He spends a quick moment to tidy Binghe’s hair. There are no braids- he had removed them early that morning, the work too crooked and childish, even if Binghe had protested. But Binghe’s hair is pulled back into a tail, and some curls have come undone. They can’t have *that* if they are going to the sect leader’s office. No one would believe that some scruffy teens have the right for a private meeting.

Shen Yuan smooths out his own hair; Binghe’s hand passes over it in a quick, careful stroke that Shen Yuan doesn’t mind. And then they are off.

Neither of them has been to the peak since the attack.

The stone floor of the plaza is covered in a thin layer of snow from last night; they pass disciples who are sweeping it, the bristles of the brooms making a *shkt shkt* sound. Shen Yuan feels stilted, trying to remember what Shen Qingqiu told them.

Walk straight. Hands by side, gaze forward, chin high. It doesn’t feel natural to walk like that. Shen Yuan keeps wanting to tuck his hands away, or to watch the ground as they walk, leaving footprints behind as they do. Binghe seems to have a similar problem.

It makes it a little easier; they exchange a glance, and immediately have to look away or risk laughing.

After discussing it more that morning, once Shen Qingqiu had left, they both decided it would be best to go to the official building.

Shen Yuan would have preferred to go to Yue Qingyuan's personal house, but considering how much shit the man no doubt has to do, the chances of him *actually* returning to his own house after a Peak Lord meeting is probably zero. Shen Yuan remembers the piles of work the man did; Yue Qingyuan kept up with his cultivation by training early in the morning and late in the evenings. Most of their interactions were either talking as Yue Qingyuan trained, or Shen Yuan sitting nearby as the man looked over the papers. At least half the day alone was dedicated to *work.* And that was when the sect was safe and stable, work passed around equally.

They're stretched thin now; Shen Yuan wonders how the desk is holding up. The weight of all the piles of books and scrolls must be fucking *insane.* He doesn't want to think about all the meetings as well, the appointments of people showing up to complain.

He should have thought about that, it turns out.

They enter the hall which leads to the office, and they immediately come to a stop.

There is a line.

There is a fucking line.

Cultivators from all twelve peaks crowd the hall; the line is more of a suggestion than a rule, every color of the damn rainbow scattered around the hall that has no business being so big and yet *somehow* still looks small with the amount of people in it. Shen Yuan even spots what he thinks is the yellow of Huan Hua Palace- diplomats, perhaps? -and other uniforms he does not recognize. Smaller sects, maybe even rogue cultivators. Those who live within the territory of Cang Qiong Mountain, he guesses, feeling dazed as he takes in the crowd.

Some look their way. Brief, uninterested glances, once they realize it is two disciples and nothing more. Shen Yuan *totally* doesn't want to grab Binghe's hand for support. Nope. That would be very childish, and he is fifteen and *basically* twenty, no matter what Airplane insists.

He is not a scared child.

Even if there are no disciples within the room. Only masters of various status, all of them tested and true. None of them have the white disciple robes.

There are so many of them.

Shen Yuan doesn't think that Yue Qingyuan will have time to talk with all of them. He *hopes* he doesn't, because if so, there will be more to discuss than weird smiles. Fucking *hell.* No wonder Mu Qingfang always stressed the importance of rest.

He looks at Binghe. Shen Yuan expects to see Binghe resigned; maybe apologetic, because now they wasted all this time, risking the wrath of Shen Qingqiu, and they won't even get to speak with the man they came for.

Binghe does not look resigned.

Shen Yuan stares.

Luo Binghe is looking straight ahead. There is no nervousness in his face, no fear. There is only determination, his eyes calculating. Shen Yuan hasn't seen Binghe like this before. Not *truly.*

He looks like a protagonist. Unbowed, unbroken.

Fearless and proud.

"There is a woman ahead," Binghe says, turning towards Shen Yuan, "this one thinks we must inform her of our arrival, so that Zhangmen-shibo knows we have been here." Binghe pauses. "Yuan?"

Shen Yuan blinks. His mouth feels dry.

"Um," he says, straightening, "yes, of course. Does- does Binghe think that Shibo will be notified of our visit?"

Binghe's smile is quick and sharp, making his eyes curve.

"Better than that," he says.

Before Shen Yuan can ask what the fuck *that* means, Binghe is leading the way through the crowd. Shen Yuan has no choice but to follow, only barely remembering to keep his posture straight as he does.

The desk they arrive at is the xianxia version of a secretary desk. A woman is standing on the other side of it, black and gray robes to show that she is a master of Qiong Ding Peak. She looks tired and distracted, sorting through what looks like the most horrid schedule that Shen Yuan has ever seen. He doesn't recognize her- granted, he doesn't think Yue Qingyuan ever *needed* a secretary until now. Maybe she is new to the job, maybe he has just never seen her doing it before now.

Either way, she does not look up when they approach.

"Please get in line," she says in a bored tone, "Sect leader Yue is due to arrive before noon. If our esteemed visitor wishes to make an appointment, this one must inform them that the rest of the week is fully booked. Please return at a later date."

Shen Yuan holds back a sigh.

"That's a shame," Binghe says, mournful and genuine to anyone else, but Shen Yuan *knows* that tone. He turns to stare at his friend, whose eyes are glinting as he says, "this one apologizes, *Shen-shixiong.* It appears we must visit another day."

The woman's gaze snaps to them.

"Shen?" she echoes, and then she looks at Shen Yuan. Her eyes are brown, and the tired boredom is suddenly nowhere to be found.

Shen Yuan, who is now scared his voice will crack if he speaks, nods.

"Ah, this must be disciple Shen," the woman says, and then she does the most insane thing ever. She moves to the side and *gestures for them to walk past her.* "Please, wait inside the office. Sect leader Yue will be delighted to see you."

What.

What!!!!!!!!

Luo Binghe bows, and Shen Yuan bows as well. And then they just–

Walk past the desk.

Past the woman.

Up to the door, heavy and dark and engraved with far too much detail, and they walk through. As if it's nothing at all. As if they have the right to be there.

Binghe closes the door behind them. The outside noise disappears, leaving them with silence. The protagonist turns to face him.

Shen Yuan gapes at him.

"See? Everyone knows that Yuan is Shibo's favorite," Binghe says, as smug as a cat with a bird in its mouth.

Chapter End Notes

SY & LBH: *cuts in line*
HHP visitor: Excuse me?? What the fuck! Is that allowed?
Wan Jian cultivator, bored: get used to it.

ta-da :D
also autumn is FULLY here and I am so, so sleepy because of it. As is my hand, which just fell asleep.
Many games are coming out this fall. Wow. As someone who loves horror but is bad at handling it, I both very much want to buy some of the horror games and also I would??? scream and cry???????? I couldn't handle alien isolation, why would I think I could handle all these other things... I really did cry during alien isolation. There's a clip and

everything of it, too. Horrible game. Evil. Any of you guys got some upcoming games you plan to buy? Or old favorites?

A lil' bit of fanart <3

arsarasp drew this funny little comic from last chapter's end notes <3

personthatleavesmessages made a Zhao De! And also concubine Ming Fan!! :0

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan does not like the Qiong Ding office.

He prefers the one which Yue Qingyuan uses in his personal home. It's *better,* at least. Better than the one they find themselves in. This office is too big, too artificial somehow. Shen Yuan thinks that if he were to move the decorative vase in one corner just a *tiiiny* bit, someone would complain about the bad feng shui.

Shen Yuan never paid attention to feng shui. Not in this life, nor in the previous one. He probably should; *Proud Immortal Demon Way* is the kind of world that likely has some kind of magic system set around it.

Mostly, this office lacks a couch.

Yue Qingyuan's *good* office has an actual couch. With blankets and cushions, though Shen Yuan had always been the only one to use them whenever he stayed over. There was the scent of hot tea and peeled fruits, and the easy comfort of Yue Qingyuan answering any questions he had.

This place is barren of comfort. Stilted, all furniture having sharp corners. The cushions which one can sit on don't even look comfortable. The vase houses a young bamboo; the reddish stalks and green leaves are the only actual colors in the room.

Even the paintings on the walls are black and white.

"Yuan?" Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan blinks.

"I can't believe you did that!" he blurts out.

Binghe's smile falters.

"You said that three times already," he says, "is it truly so bad? Yuan wished to speak with Shibo. This is the quickest way."

"W-Well. Yes, of course," Shen Yuan stutters, tucking his hands into his sleeves, bunching the fabric up even as his fingers *ache* from it, "but what if he gets mad? What if gege- what if- it could be *so bad,* Binghe. And we don't even know how long the meeting will be. What if we must wait here for *hours?* I don't even think the kitchen is stocked!"

Binghe, who had been about to speak, pauses.

"Kitchen? There is one here?"

“Yes. Or, maybe it’s too generous to call it a kitchen,” Shen Yuan says, gesturing vaguely towards the door that is only barely visible, “but it’s for tea and things. Shibo normally keeps it stocked, but he’s been so busy, I don’t think…” his breath trembles. Shen Yuan swallows.

He sits down on the floor and hugs his knees.

After a moment, Binghe sits down next to him.

“Yuan said that Shibo did not act right, and that is why he wished to speak with him. So why would Zhangmen-shibo be mad at Yuan for visiting?” he carefully asks. “Would he not be happy that Yuan cares enough to worry?”

Yes. No. Shen Yuan doesn’t *know.*

“What if he actually *is* mad at me?” he mumbles, the words tumbling out. The floor is cold. He feels nauseous. Shen Yuan doesn’t want the words to fall past his lips; they feel sharp and awkward. But he can’t choke them down. Worries he had been pushing down are suddenly too difficult to swallow, which is dumb. They are *here.* What are they going to do, leave before Yue Qingyuan gets back?

There are so many people outside. He would rather die.

“What if he is disappointed, like Shizun is, that I could not defend myself?” Shen Yuan continues, “then I’m just- just overthinking that- that something is wrong. What if I’m the problem, and he tells me–”

“Then Shibo is the one who needs to draw Hong Jing.”

Shen Yuan’s breath hitches. Binghe wraps an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer. It’s almost a hug. Shen Yuan shudders as he exhales.

“What- what does Binghe mean?”

“If Shibo says such a thing to Yuan, then Shibo is clearly possessed,” Binghe stubbornly says. “And we will tell Shen Qingqiu, because even he would know that.”

Shen Yuan sniffles.

“Why wouldn’t he be disappointed in me? Everyone else is,” he mumbles, “even- even Mu-shishu. And now Shizun won’t even let me walk *anywhere* without him. It’s like I’m a dog! Except dogs *learn.* I’m dumber than a dog!”

“Yuan is the smartest person in the sect!”

Shen Yuan scoffs.

“It’s true,” Binghe insists, shifting so that they face each other, kneeling close to Shen Yuan.

His hands are resting on Shen Yuan's arms. They squeeze, a reassuring weight that matches the fierce expression on his face. "Even when we had just joined, Yuan was smarter than all the other disciples at Qing Jing. Even some masters! And we were twelve. Yuan is *not* dumber than a dog. Yuan is the smartest person I know."

"I can't even do calligraphy right."

"Just because you write too fast," Binghe says, "because Yuan thinks quicker than anyone else, including his own hands."

Not you, Shen Yuan thinks. He's not bitter about it; the thought feels syrup sweet and warm. It's true, too. Binghe is always quick to solve every mystery, figure out every problem. Sometimes it was frustrating. Other times it was the best thing.

Binghe is just biased. Shen Yuan shouldn't take it to heart, this reassurement. Binghe wasn't there when Mu Qingfang told him what he did wrong; he doesn't know how much Shen Yuan fucked up the whole demon invasion plot.

And yet.

"What if Shibo never liked me?" he asks, looking away. "Everyone knows that… that Shizun probably has some dirt on him or something. What if he's just nice to me because of Shizun?"

Luo Binghe smiles.

"Yuan," he says, "how much coin do you carry?"

Shen Yuan blushes.

Tucked underneath his robes, there is a pouch. It's of a fancy make, pale green silk with red strings. It's not something he could ever afford. Except he can; because there is always money in it.

Because of Yue Qingyuan.

The pouch is always there. Shen Yuan likes having it nearby, and Binghe has seen him count the coins in it late at night and has never judged him for it. Because those coins are *safety,* and Binghe knows it.

Shen Yuan remembers how hungry he was, making his way to Cang Qiong Mountain. He hadn't taken any money with him from Lady Jia. Hadn't been able to. So Shen Yuan had spent half a year on the road, back to street child status and worse as he had to leave town after town, the System a constant, guiding presence that he *hated.*

Money mattered.

And even though he couldn't leave the mountain to spend any of it, Yue Qingyuan had

continued to give him more throughout the year. Every time Shen Yuan had stayed over, more coins had been added. It was now a comforting weight, something Shen Yuan rarely thought of but still liked having on him, as often as he could. Just in case.

“I don’t see why that matters,” he lies.

“Yes you do,” Binghe says, smile widening as Shen Yuan’s blush spreads, “and Yuan knows that Shibo would not do that just because of Shen Qingqiu. Right?”

Maybe.

It was never revealed, in the original. The reason why Yue Qingyuan had always let Shen Qingqiu get away with everything. Shen Yuan had assumed that the man had some dirt on him, some kind of blackmail or *something* that made it impossible for the sect leader to act. And then Luo Binghe got his revenge, and it had been satisfying and Shen Yuan had thought that maybe Yue Qingyuan could finally become the righteous leader he was always meant to be. Because he had been *cool.*

And then Yue Qingyuan died.

So maybe it had never been blackmail at all.

“... I guess,” he says, “but he might still be disappointed in me. And now we will be taking up more of his time, and I didn’t- Binghe, I didn’t think.” *He never thinks.* “What if we are punished?” It had felt so important, to speak with Yue Qingyuam. But now when they were here, he couldn’t understand *why* he had been so eager to do so.

“We won’t be,” Binghe says, “especially not if we make him tea.”

Shen Yuan blinks; and then he smiles, helpless to stop it.

“Tea?”

“Tea,” Binghe nods, and stands up. He tugs Shen Yuan onto his feet as well, giving his hands a squeeze before letting go, “he can’t be mad at us if Yuan serves him tea. No one can be mad at *that.* Not even Shen Qingqiu.”

“Shizun is plenty mad anyway,” Shen Yuan says, but he follows as Binghe leads the way to the hidden door, painted to match the walls, “tea doesn’t help with that.”

“And yet he always has tea with Yuan,” Binghe points out, and Shen Yuan huffs. But he can’t deny it.

The so-called kitchen is more of a serving area.

It is a small room that only barely fits both of them. It has more shelves than anything else, made of dark wood that makes the space seem even smaller. It is dimly lit up with a nightpearl in the ceiling; as if needing to rub in just how wealthy their sect is. There are

spotless containers of glass and ceramic, neatly placed in many rows. None of them are labeled. There is a black teapot set, with cranes made in white lining the curved outsides. Fancy, minimalistic, beautiful.

Shen Yuan doesn't trust his hands to hold any of it.

"The bigger jars usually have nuts and such in them," he slowly explains, "but gege- Shibo doesn't ever label the tea, so we have to guess." Shen Yuan grimaces. "Some of them are *really* expensive, Binghe."

"Does Yuan know which flavors it is that Shibo prefers?" his friend asks, and when Shen Yuan hesitates, Binghe does not hesitate to give his hand another squeeze. Does not hold back a reassuring smile.

Shen Yuan breathes out.

Right, it doesn't matter if they are really expensive teas. Yue Qingyuan is the one who bought them.

"... fruity. Or anything sweet," he finally says, and points at a tightly sealed jar. "This one has honey, I remember that much."

Yue Qingyuan did not have the habit of spending much money, (well, other than on Shen Yuan and sometimes–) but he certainly made sure that he really did have everything stocked. Every container which Binghe brought down to open and peer inside was at most half-empty. It reminded Shen Yuan of the man's personal kitchen, that little corner in a too big room that always had everything stocked. It's so different from Shen Qingqiu's kitchen, which gathered dust until Binghe arrived.

In the end they settle on one that smells of berries, dried green leaves and purple-pink somethings. Binghe is pouring water into the teapot as Shen Yuan uses his qi to start the fire, when they both grow still at the sound of voices.

"– reason why Shidi is using the window to enter?" Yue Qingyuan's voice could be heard, a little tired and perfectly pleasant. It was such an abrupt thing to hear, that Shen Yuan nearly caught his sleeves on fire from the surprise, accidentally making the flame flare.

"There are people the other way," another replied, a voice he didn't recognize. When Shen Yuan glances towards Binghe, the other boy seems equally confused. But it must be a peak lord. Yue Qingyuan called the man *shidi.* "And this one does not have the patience for them."

"Shit," Shen Yuan says, and swats Binghe's arm when his friend gives him that half-shocked look he always gives, whenever Shen Yuan's crude vocabulary makes an appearance, "he's meeting a *peak lord.* What do we do now? We can't serve tea now!"

"Maybe we should whisper?" Binghe suggests in a whisper, glancing towards the door that had drifted shut while they examined the room.

Shen Yuan shakes his head.

“They can’t hear us,” he says, and points at the arrays carved into the door-frame, “we can hear them, but they can’t hear us. See?”

He remembers the first time finding out. Shen Yuan had offered to make tea, to refill their snacks as Mu Qingfang came for a visit. Shen Yuan had been talking about the snakes which Binghe had been helping out with on that one mission so many months ago now, unaware that the moment the door closed behind him, the two peak lords couldn’t hear him.

It had been very embarrassing, returning mid-talk and being met with two amused smiles. He had then been informed of how they had missed half of the conversation, but decided to wait until he returned to tell him.

Embarrassing, because that meant Shen Yuan had rambled for who knows *how* long, and not even thought to question the silence.

Yue Qingyuan had explained that it was because of how the former peak lord kept servants. A servant was expected to hear any requests; but no one wanted to hear them preparing tea.

(Shen Yuan sometimes wondered if Yue Qingyuan had been a servant. He had said it in such a wry way.)

“Ah,” Binghe nods, “Yuan wants to eavesdrop.”

“No! I mean- that is-” Shen Yuan splutters, face red. When Binghe’s smile grows into a grin, he huffs and crosses his arms. “What, Binghe thinks we shouldn’t?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Shen Yuan squints at him. Binghe takes down a bowl and fills it with candied nuts, and then holds it out. He is still grinning, just wide enough to show a hint of teeth. His eyes are glimmering like stars under the night pearl’s light. Binghe shakes the bowl.

Well, it would be rude to say no.

As Shen Yuan leans back, loudly munching, Binghe prepares enough tea for four people. It makes sense. Shen Yuan just doesn’t like the implication that they will have to leave the room eventually. That they will have a *talk,* one which he doesn’t even know how to start, much less now when there is a second peak lord in the room.

‘You smiled weird’ doesn’t seem like the best option.

He rather spend his time trying to figure out which peak lord it is. He hasn’t met many of them. Being a disciple mostly stuck on one peak does that, he guesses. And some were in seclusion. Or long travels.

Or women. Which was *fine.*

“What did Wan-shidi wish to speak of?” Yue Qingyuan asks as Binghe goes to lean against Shen Yuan, shoulders bumping. The tea has yet to boil. Binghe holds out the bowl again, and Shen Yuan accepts the offer.

Wan. Wan who? Wan Qing-who?

“Stolen artifact,” Wan Qingwhoever replies. His voice is deep, nonchalant. It is closer too, and Shen Yuan slows his chewing, suddenly worried that the man will open the door.

“Did Shidi not speak of this at the meeting?” Yue Qingyuan wonders. “Of how the barriers broke over each peak, and that there were attempts of theft at Lie Jiu Peak?”

“Yes.”

“And Shidi asked us to ensure that we had not lost artifacts on other peaks than Qiong Ding?”

“Yes.”

“... but Shidi still wishes to speak about a stolen artifact.”

“This one was recently discovered by a Qiong Ding disciple,” Wan Qingwhoever explains, moving away from the door. Shen Yuan and Binghe both breathe out. “It was to be moved to this one’s peak the same day of the attack.”

Huh.

Lie Jiu Peak; they had visited that place once. He and Binghe had gone to pick up boxes of talismans. It was the peak of, well, talismans. But also artifacts. Shen Yuan remembers that weirdo who called his face ‘trouble’. But why would something discovered by Qiong Ding be moved there? If an artifact was discovered, the peak who found it was in charge of it. Only the truly powerful ones, the *dangerous* ones, were transported to Lie Jiu instead. Sometimes ancient ones that needed to be tended to as well, like a magical museum, but…

What kind of artifact had Qiong Ding found?

“This one takes it that the artifact has not been moved into Wan-shidi’s care,” Yue Qingyuan says. He sounds even more tired now.

“Correct. This was only recently brought to this one’s attention. It is a problem. More so considering our circumstances.”

“In what way?”

“It is a necklace. A pendant. The description was vague,” the man explains, and then, “this bamboo is from Qing Jing Peak.”

“It is. Shidi, please continue.”

“Ah. Yes. It is a pendant. The chain was silver, with a fish of some kind. The Qiong Ding disciple did not offer much detail. However, they claimed it allowed demons to go undetected.”

Wait.

Shen Yuan grabs Binghe’s arm.

“Binghe,” he breathes, their eyes meeting, “if that’s true…”

Luo Binghe’s eyes are bright. He nods.

“It might be the solution,” he whispers back, only to falter. “But it was stolen, wasn’t it?”

“So we track it down,” Shen Yuan argues, “we just- I just have to convince Shizun to let me off the mountain, and then we can try and track it down before anyone else finds it! And then Binghe doesn’t have to hide, or leave! We can just act normal, and no one will ever know!”

Outside, Yue Qingyuan speaks up.

“Does Shidi suspect it was stolen during the invasion?”

“There is a risk of it. The design was simple. We know that certain weapons and clothes have been stolen from Qiong Ding Peak. But it was a recent addition, modest and not intended to stay. It could have been lost or destroyed during the chaos.”

“But due to the invasion, and the threat of further attacks, Wan-shidi believes it was likely stolen.”

“Yes. The risk of it being used to infiltrate the sect with spies is large.”

“... indeed.” Yue Qingyuan’s sigh is loud enough that even they can hear it. Or perhaps it is because he is closer now, something that they realize at the same time as he says, “would Shidi like to have tea before he leaves?”

The door opens.

Shen Yuan and Binghe startles away from it, but where could they go? The room is too small and cramped, leaving absolutely nowhere to hide. Their green and white robes stand out against the dark wood. Shen Yuan, for whatever reason, tries to hide behind Binghe.

Yue Qingyuan slowly blinks.

“Disciple Luo?” he asks, and then his eyes drift towards Shen Yuan, where he is doing his best to hide behind his friend, “... Xiao-Yuan?” Yue Qingyuan adds, confusion clear in his voice. Shen Yuan flinches. And then he reluctantly unfolds, meeting the man’s eyes.

“... hi gege,” Shen Yuan mumbles.

Over Yue Qingyuan’s shoulder, a man peeks in.

Hooded, gray eyes meet Shen Yuan’s. The man has freckles and a blank look on his face as he looks at them. Dark hair. When he scratches his chin, one can see how his fingers are permanently stained black. They stare at each other.

“Oh, the face of trouble,” the man says, and Shen Yuan remembers.

“You’re a peak lord!?” he blurts out, and then he slaps a hand over his mouth. The man doesn’t even blink.

“Yes,” he says, and disappears out of view, “this one has no need for tea. Are they spies? Shall we test them? We should.”

Yue Qingyuan does not look away from them, but Shen Yuan watches as exasperation flits over his face, there for a glimpse of a second before it is covered up with a neutral smile.

“They are not spies, Shidi,” he says.

“They could be,” Wan Qingwhoever insists, “it would be interesting. This one is allowed to experiment on spies.”

What. What!!!

Shen Yuan is abruptly very aware of how Binghe is a half-demon in hiding, and that the Lie Jiu Peak specializes in uncovering the hidden.

“We are not spies!” Shen Yuan loudly protests as he tugs Binghe behind him, the other boy too surprised to stop him, “we just- this one wished to speak with gege and- that is, we were making tea and- and…” he falters.

It does look like they were spying, doesn’t it?

And they kind of were. But not with malicious intentions! Sure, they want to steal the pendant for themselves, but not to be *evil* or anything!

“This one apologizes,” Binghe says, catching Shen Yuan’s hand in his, giving it a squeeze where Yue Qingyuan can’t see, “we were going to make an appointment, as Zhangmen-shibo appears busy. But the master by the door let us in upon hearing Shixiong's name.”

Bending the truth, excellent! It doesn’t even sound like anything but fact. Shen Yuan still can’t help but avert his eyes. His heart is beating too fast, rabbit-quick hops within his rib cage.

“We did not mean to cause trouble,” he mumbles.

There is the sound of water bubbling; it seems so loud in this small space, in this strange, tense silence that settles over them as Yue Qingyuan simply *looks.*

Shen Yuan tries to look right back.

The man looks tired. Not the kind of sleepy that Shen Yuan was used to encountering during too-early mornings, nor the contented tired that Yue Qingyuan wore in the evenings.

He looks *drained.*

"Xi- disciple Shen wished to speak with this one?" Yue Qingyuan says, and Shen Yuan wilts.

"Yes, gege."

"And disciple Luo?"

Moral support, Shen Yuan doesn't say.

"Shizun has not returned this one's sword yet. Binghe offered to help," he says instead, "if gege is… upset, please only be upset with this one. Binghe only wished to help."

Binghe makes a sound of protest. Shen Yuan digs an elbow into him to shut him up.

"... Qingqiu-shidi does not know that disciple Shen is here?"

Shen Yuan mutely shakes his head.

Yue Qingyuan sighs, and steps aside.

"As you two have already begun to prepare tea, this one may as well listen to what disciple Shen wishes to speak about," Yue Qingyuan allows, turning towards the other peak lord, "does Wan-shidi plan to stay?"

"No. Shixiong will look for the pendant?"

"This one will ensure a search happens."

"Hm." The man's eyes move towards them. He seems to consider them for a moment, before he says, "and these two are not spies?"

"They are not."

"Very well."

He leaves, and Shen Yuan dares to peek his head out of the room to watch him go. The man really, truly does not *look* like a peak lord. Not with the ink splattered robes and bells jingling from his belt, not the way he has one??? Just *one???* Sleeve tied up out of the way, baring a

pale arm that has as much ink splatter on it as it has freckles.

The Peak Lord of Lie Jiu leaves through the window.

Shen Yuan stares after him, feeling more confused than ever.

“Would disciple Shen like to sit down?” Yue Qingyuan asks, moving away from the serving room. Shen Yuan startles, then hesitates. He looks towards Binghe. Binghe, who is picking carefully between the jars of snacks. Who meets Shen Yuan’s eyes and stops, a question in his eyes.

Does Yuan want me there?

Shen Yuan shakes his head, despite the urge to say *Yes*. He is a big boy. Fifteen years now. He can handle a little talk, can’t he? And if Yue Qingyuan keeps… if Shen Yuan *is* the problem, then Binghe will tell Shen Qingqiu. Because Binghe says it must be a sign of possession.

It’s an odd comfort, but it works. Shen Yuan turns to follow.

“This one thanks gege,” he says, and kneels down by the table. It allows him to hide how his hands tremble. He keeps them out of sight below the table, and does his very best to sit up straight.

Yue Qingyuan places Xuan Su in its display before he sits down opposite of Shen Yuan.

Silence settles. Thick and itchy like a woolen blanket, and Shen Yuan fidgets. He can’t hear Binghe; the door must have closed behind him. He should speak. He is the one who wanted to talk. As such, it is only polite that *he* is the first one to speak up.

Shen Yuan opens his mouth and promptly closes it.

Yue Qingyuan takes pity on him.

“This one was unaware that disciple Shen had met Wan Qingsheng,” he says, that wrong smile on his face. “Did he visit Wan-shidi often?”

“Um. Only once,” Shen Yuan replies, “very briefly. I- this one didn’t know… that he was- that he was a peak lord?” It comes out as a question. Stupid. He swallows, tries to focus.

Yue Qingyuan sits perfectly. Back straight, hands politely placed. His smile is unwavering.

“Wan Qingsheng has a unique personality,” the man says. His voice is pleasant. “But Qingqiu-shidi must be expecting disciple Shen to return soon. What is it that he wishes to speak about?”

The dark eyes that meet Shen Yuan’s are blank and distant.

For whatever reason, those eyes are impossible to meet. Shen Yuan ducks his head, blinking

rapidly as his own eyes burn. The fabric of his pants wrinkle, nails digging into them as his throat grows tight.

It's so fucking *stupid.*

"... disciple Shen?"

Shen Yuan's breath hitches.

"Can you stop calling me that?" he chokes out.

"Disciple Shen?" Yue Qingyuan carefully says. He sounds *confused,* and yet he still sounds just as impersonal as before, and Shen Yuan has to remind himself about what Binghe said. About what he himself *knows,* from the original. Yue Qingyuan cares. He has to.

In the original, he died trying to save the damn scum villain himself. He died in an ambush, the poison so vicious there was nothing left and he never, ever hesitated. And that was with Shen Qingqiu! Rude ass bitch *Shen Qingqiu.* So Shen Yuan knows he cares. Maybe not about Shen Yuan, except he must, because Binghe is right.

It's just that the way he speaks now, the way he smiles, it's all wrong. Shen Yuan is here to fix it. Because it's wrong, and Shen Qingqiu won't do it. So Shen Yuan has to.

Binghe is a door away. Binghe is making tea and picking out Shen Yuan's favorites, and if Shen Yuan asks him to, he knows that Binghe will fly them back to Qing Jing Peak immediately.

He steels himself and desperately hopes he doesn't sound like he is about to cry.

"I'm Xiao-Yuan," he says, "not *disciple Shen.* Can gege stop calling me that? Even if he is mad, can he please just- can you please not call me *that?* I'll fix it, whatever I did!" the words burst out louder than he intends, and he forces himself to look up, to show his sincerity even if tears threaten to spill.

Yue Qingyuan looks stunned.

"Fix it?" he echoes.

"Yes! Yes, I can fix it," Shen Yuan insists and he leans forward, because his eyes may feel hot but the *blankness* isn't there anymore. Yue Qingyuan looks stunned, no longer behind opaque glass. He looks less like Sect Leader Yue and more like *gege,* and maybe Shen Yuan should shut up and let him speak instead, but– "if you just tell me what I did? Mu-shishu told me, and Shizun did as well, but- but if it's something *different,* then please tell this foolish one!"

Every word tumbles out clumsily. He should have written it all down. He should have spent all this time preparing what to say. Except he did, of course, it's just that he never wrote it down. And now it's all forgotten, and Shen Yuan has to improvise.

He sucks at improvising.

Yue Qingyuan blinks. Once, twice. Shen Yuan curls his fingers inwards, the wood hard against his knuckles as he holds his breath.

“Disciple Shen,” Yue Qingyuan begins, and it’s Shen Yuan’s turn to blink once, twice, eyes stinging as he bites his lip *hard,* trying to not– “Xiao-Yuan,” Yue Qingyuan then hurriedly says instead, and hearing the name is…

Yue Qingyuan sharply inhales.

“Fuck,” Shen Yuan chokes out, and leans away. He clumsily wipes at his eyes, face red as his stupid eyes start *leaking,* “I’m- I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t- I’m fine. I’m fine!”

He doesn’t sound fine. Shen Yuan’s voice cracks, humiliation stacked upon mortification. He wishes the table was taller. Enough that he could just crawl under it and hide. Yue Qingyuan would be nice and pretend he didn’t see. He isn’t good with crying, which is why Shen Yuan should stop doing it.

Yue Qingyuan stands up.

Shen Yuan half-expects him to jump out the window, just like Wan Qingsheng. He expects a hurried escape, or perhaps an awkward pat. He expects to be left alone.

Yue Qingyuan circles the table, kneels down and hugs him.

He smells like cold winter air; his robes are still chilled from having been outside. The man is stiff, arms awkwardly wrapped around Shen Yuan, and it reminds him of months ago. When Shen Yuan made furniture explode, the floor covered in splinters and Yue Qingyuan had hugged him. It was when wildfire-qi warmed him from deep within and calmed his own. Except Yue Qingyuan hadn’t been so awkward then.

Shen Yuan sniffles and burrows deeper. It’s a bad idea. He will get snot on black robes, he will leave a mess and Yue Qingyuan so obviously doesn’t *want* to hug him.

But he *is* hugging him.

So Shen Yuan hugs back.

There is a wet spot on Yue Qingyuan’s shoulder.

He can't feel it. There are too many layers for that, thick and expensive cloth that shields him from the sensation as well as it shields him from the winter air. And yet he is certain it is there.

His arms are around Shen Yuan. One hand is resting on the boy's shoulder. The other hand is by the upper back. Yue Qingyuan's hands are pressed flat, and he is uncertain if he should tighten the hug or not. In contrast, the boy's fingers are gripping hard enough to wrinkle the cloth. Minute trembles which Yue Qingyuan can feel through the fabric.

Shen Yuan's cries are muffled by Qiong Ding black.

Yue Qingyuan does not know what to do.

When Shen Yuan had begun to cry, voice breaking and gaze averted in shame, Yue Qingyuan had blanked. Seeing Xiao-Jiu's face twisting up into tears had sent his mind skittering down past memories, of dusty streets, empty bellies and Yue Qi hugging an angry little boy close to his chest. And so he moved and hugged that angry little boy again.

Xiao-Jiu had always fought against it. He would hiss and bite and claw like a kitten lashing out at the world around them, and Yue Qi had been the only thing safe enough to fight against.

Yue Qingyuan hugged Shen Yuan and had expected an angry kitten.

But Shen Yuan is not Xiao-Jiu. He does not lash out, he does not fight until he folds and angrily hugs back, snarling threats at the world all around. Instead he clings and hides and takes everything upon himself, the very opposite of Xiao-Jiu and Yue Qingyuan thinks he has made a mistake.

It is not that he didn't know that they were two different people. Shen Yuan is all smiles and eager questions, happy to accept gifts and shy of attention. He is not like Xiao-Jiu, and yet the realization hits Yue Qingyuan like lightning striking at a tree.

He looks down at the boy in his arms, and tries to remember what words can offer comfort. As the face of Cang Qiong Mountain, he is good at speaking. He knows what to say to earn a good result. That skill has now been rendered useless.

Yue Qingyuan's eyes land on a fan.

It sticks out from Shen Yuan's belt, a thin stick of a thing, but it is unmistakably a fan.

"Xiao-Yuan has a fan?" he blurts out, and Shen Yuan's soft cries hiccups to a stop. The boy leans away, and Yue Qingyuan has to will himself to loosen the hug- *when did it tighten? He didn't want to trap him*- so that Shen Yuan could look down at it.

He sniffles.

"Shizun gave it to me," Shen Yuan says. He fumbles as he removes it from his belt, fingers

clumsy. He holds it out to Yue Qingyuan, and Yue Qingyuan can't do anything but accept it. "For hand practice," the boy adds as an explanation.

His voice trembles; his nose is stuffed. Yue Qingyuan wonders if he should offer a handkerchief to blow in, or if that would be a step too far. Would it be too embarrassing for the boy before him, or would he accept it? He is fifteen now, is he not? Would that make him less eager to accept such an offer now, than when he was fourteen? Should Yue Qingyuan simply *ask?*

Instead he unfolds the fan.

Plum blossoms greet him. They bloom upon a dark branch of ink, the texture of the petals given height by the way the paper fan folds.

"Oh," he breathes, and they are still close enough that he can feel Shen Yuan fidget against him. Yue Qingyuan looks away from the fan just in time to see the boy avert his gaze.

His chest aches.

"These are Qingqiu's brushstrokes," he blurts out, and jade green eyes snap to him, wide and lined with red.

"They are?" Shen Yuan asks.

"Yes," Yue Qingyuan replies, and presses his fingers to the branch, "it is one of his earlier works," he says, hoping he is saying the right thing, grasping at what words he is capable of as he continues, "shortly before he became a head disciple. He painted a set of three, for the three friends of winter. There should be two more that match this one. One of bamboo, and one of–"

"Pine trees," Shen Yuan says, dawning realization on his face, "I- I saw that one. I didn't… I didn't realize he painted his own fans."

"Not often, and he threw many of them away," he says, "but this set of three survived." Yue Qingyuan smiles as he remembers catching Xiao-Jiu painting the fan in his hands. The red ink had stained his fingertips.

Shen Yuan smiles back. It is shy and awkward and wholly his, and Yue Qingyuan folds the fan and gives it back. Shen Yuan opens it again, looking at the plum blossoms. He looks awed and bewildered, nose red and still sniffling.

"Xiao-Yuan did nothing wrong," Yue Qingyuan says, and once again Shen Yuan looks up at him. It makes it harder to speak, but Yue Qingyuan forces the words out, throat feeling tight as he does, "this gege is the foolish one, not Xiao-Yuan."

He does not look away. It is important to ensure that Shen Yuan believes him. To look away would take away sincerity from his words.

Shen Yuan’s shoulders slowly relax.

“Can I borrow gege’s handkerchief?” he asks, and the relief upon hearing him ask is staggering.

Yue Qingyuan presses the handkerchief into Shen Yuan’s hands.

“Of course,” he says, and feels like he finally did something right.

Chapter End Notes

SY: *noisily blows his nose*
LBH, in the other room: *slowly lets go of zheng yang* Okay Zhangmen-shibo can live another day

Is this the longest scene in a chapter I've written yet??? Or is that still the demon invasion??? Either way, WOW!!! It fought me the whole way :D
trying to make YQY and SY have an emotional conversation is like herding two extremely greased up weasels convinced you're here to kill them. And fun fact, originally it was going to have Wan Qingsheng be the starter pov! Crazy. Sometimes, a chapter is simply rewritten so, so many times.

But I hope you guys liked it <3

Now, just like last year around this time, a little warning. I am still going to try my very best to update once every two weeks, on mondays, but the colder seasons tend to fuck with my immune system, bones, brain and also just the general concept of time. That and this is one of the busiest times of the year for me at work (more so nearing christmas)
All this is to say, I will try to keep up with my schedule, but if a chapter ends up a week late, don't panic <_<

Fanart time~!

flatasafryingpan has drawn lovely lovely BingYuan! Look at the hair <3

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wind is bitingly cold on the way back.

Yue Qingyuan shields him from the worst of it, which Shen Yuan is going to pretend is totally okay and fine. It's not like he feels *tiny* next to the man, even though he is, like, *so* close to his shoulders now, taller than he ever was in his previous life. Maybe it has less to do with actual size and more with snotting all over the poor guy like an hour ago.

Best not to think too much about it; Shen Yuan might just implode and die from the mortification if he does.

It's better to focus on standing up. To focus on how odd Xuan Su feels under his feet, the sword still sheathed, nothing at all like how anyone else flies. How anyone *should* fly.

The book on swords he read ages ago said as much.

Flying a sheathed sword is possible, but risky. It mutes the connection. The 'connection' that works like magnetic clamps to your feet is slippery at best like this, meaning you run a greater risk of sliding right off of it. Why Yue Qingyuan still does it, he has no clue. It could be a power-move, or maybe just a bad habit. Xuan Su *is* massive. Probably hard to unsheathe it without knocking things over.

Then again, this is the first time that Shen Yuan has seen Yue Qingyuan fly at all. Much like how it was his first time seeing Yue Qingyuan climb through a window when they were leaving, insisting on escorting them both back to Qing Jing Peak himself.

He had smiled when he said it; the real kind of smile that had been missed. So Shen Yuan had been unable to say no, and here they were.

Binghe is also nearby. Flying as close as he can without being impolite, and Shen Yuan wiggles his fingers at him in a wave. It makes his friend smile, dark eyes glinting like obsidian in the sharp sunlight as he waves back and does a little twirl with his sword. Show-off.

And if Shen Yuan decides to commit that smile to memory, so what? It might be his last time seeing it, depending on how well Ning Yingying's distraction worked! If it worked at all.

They land near the bamboo house. Yue Qingyuan helps him down from Xuan Su, eyes sliding towards the dark windows. His shoulders slumps upon seeing the lack of life.

"Shizun is probably busy," Shen Yuan says, flexing his fingers, shaking out his hands to get back some feeling, the very tips of his fingers prickling with numbness, "with, um. With

stuff."

"Of course," Yue Qingyuan replies, turning back towards him. One shoulder is a little shinier than the rest of him. Did. Did it freeze? Did Shen Yuan's *snot and tears freeze on his fucking shoulder?* "Qingqiu-shidi is a hardworking man. This one would not wish to distract him from his duties."

Shen Yuan is too busy dying from embarrassment to listen.

"Ah," Binghe says next to him, peering down the winding stairs which leads to the bamboo house, "this one can see Shizun."

Yue Qingyuan perks up, quickly stepping closer to them. Shen Yuan wonders if anyone would notice if he just. Cleaned the man's shoulder? Just a bit? He could do it with his qi. And if someone *did* notice, surely none of the two present would make a thing out of it?

Shen Qingqiu would, though. And now when Binghe has pointed it out, he is indeed quickly making his way up the stairs. The dark green robes of the day glint like some kind of reptile, here to kill them, or worse, make Binghe sleep in the fucking woodshed.

Shen Yuan reaches out with his qi and *focuses* through the mounting panic. Binghe's arm is pressing against his, a light weight of casual closeness. The sun makes the snow sparkle and Shen Yuan has never tried to remove frozen snot, but it can't be harder than getting rid of water from his hair. And he is a little out of practice, but manipulating qi is… is like riding a bike, he thinks. Or he hopes. Shen Yuan breathes in.

When he breathes out, there are sunspots in his eyes and a hand squeezing his own.

Shen Yuan blinks, letting Binghe tug him along. Yue Qingyuan's shoulder looks like it's free of body fluids now, which is good. Shen Yuan had melted it from ice and then flicked it away like he would flick rain, and–

And Shen Qingqiu is right there, glaring at Yue Qingyuan from behind a fan painted with pine trees. Unaware or uncaring of what just happened, of their little trip off the peak. As Shen Yuan lets himself hear their conversation, he suddenly knows why Binghe is tugging him away.

"–Liu-shidi is merely concerned," Yue Qingyuan says, standing a step closer than anyone else would ever be allowed.

"Is that why Zhangmen-shixiong is here?" Shen Qingqiu snaps, "to soothe that brute's *concerns* and order this one to Wan Jian Peak? Why not do it at the meeting, which we all attended?"

"No, this one only wished to… that is, this one would not ask such a thing of Qingqiu-shidi. This one trusts him to keep the sect's best interest in mind, and one day Liu-shidi will agree," Yue Qingyuan replies, and Shen Yuan watches as Shen Qingqiu snaps the fan closed, stepping closer to hiss something back. They are high up enough on the mountain that like

this, there is nothing but blue sky and distant mountain tops.

It makes the green and black of their robes stand out in such a way that they could be a painting of two figures leaning into each other.

And then Binghe tugs him out of sight, and with one last shared glance, they both decide to run for it. Just in case Shen Qingqiu remembers that he hasn't seen them all morning.

By the time they stumble their way to their tree, Shen Yuan is gasping for air. His cheeks are burning hot, and Binghe's face is almost as flushed. They flop down to sit between the large roots, gazing up to the sky. With the tree branches in the way, dark lines against the bright blue canvas, Shen Yuan feels a bit like he is inside a bird cage.

For a moment, the only sound is of them trying to catch their breath.

"Is Yuan happy now?" Binghe asks once they have calmed down.

"Hm?" Shen Yuan turns to meet his friend's eyes. Like this, they are very close. The roots press them together, every movement making something knock against the other. They are close enough that he swears he sees a glint of red in Binghe's eyes. Shen Yuan has slid down just a bit, enough that it feels like they are of the same height.

Luo Binghe smiles at him.

"Does Yuan know now that Shibo would never hate him?" he asks, cheeky and smug enough that Shen Yuan has to blow air at him for it, a puff of winter-breath making Binghe sputter and laugh.

"Is Binghe going to say 'I told you so'?" Shen Yuan demands to know, elbowing him when he tries to squirm away, "he's not allowed!"

"Yuan always does it, this humble one feels that he *is* allowed, actually," Binghe replies, swatting him away. The smile is more of a grin now, his dark eyes sparkling, and Shen Yuan has the absurd urge to pinch his cheeks. Or perhaps press his palms against the flushed skin, to see how warm those cheeks are in contrast to the winter air.

He looks away.

"Maybe Binghe was right," he relents, pressing one hand against his chest. His heart has yet to calm down from their run. He is so out of shape. "Though we should find Shijie. Ask her how it went."

Binghe hums in agreement and makes no move to get up.

Neither does Shen Yuan.

Shen Qingqiu listens as the children run off, the snow-crunch of hurried feet loud in his ears.

Idiots believe they can fool an Immortal.

“Did the child cry on you?” he asks once he can no longer hear them, turning his eyes back to the *other* idiot before him, “or did Zhangmen-shixiong let some other blubbering fool close enough to stab our esteemed sect leader?”

Yue Qingyuan smiles.

It is not the one which Shen Qingqiu would peel back if he could. This is a familiar one, of which he has not seen for weeks now. It is tilted more upwards on one side, a hint of a dimple at the end of the curve. It is a careless and imperfect thing which Yue Qingyuan and the boy both share, despite looking nothing alike beside it.

It is less infuriating than the one which Yue Qingyuan has worn until now. That is the only reason why he allows the man to stand so close, their breath sharing space when their eyes meet.

In the sun, there is a reddish tint to Yue Qingyuan’s dark eyes, akin to the bark of dawn redwood. It makes them appear warmer than they could possibly be.

“Xiao-Yuan attempted to clean it,” the idiot replies, glancing towards the spot on which the child had stained, the fabric there now clean yet shinier than the rest of it, “and appears to have succeeded.”

“He did it in front of this one. If he had hoped to be subtle, he failed. And why were you allowing him to do such a thing?” Shen Qingqiu’s lips curl into a sneer, remembering how he had seen the very end of the process. Glittering like the snow around them before it disappeared, as if it had not been something as weak as a child’s tears. “It is unbecoming.”

“To allow a child to cry on this one’s shoulder?”

“It does not inspire respect,” he points out, “unless Shixiong has decided to pander to the lower masses.”

Yue Qingyuan hums in reply. He does not appear to agree, but is too cowardly to voice it. Shen Qingqiu’s fist clenches around the fan in his grasp. It is only the two of them. If he were to hit the man, none would be able to voice an opinion on it. Yue Qingyuan would let him.

“I told him who painted his fan.”

Shen Qingqiu’s mind stops.

“Why,” he says, each word slow and drawn out, like a hiss of steam between his lips, “would you do that?”

Yue Qingyuan’s smile softens.

“It made him happy to hear, Qingqiu.”

“Doubtful,” he scoffs and steps away, turning towards the door of his abode, “the child’s joy does not stem from this one. As Shixiong has been *absent,* he has not had the joy of witnessing disciple Shen’s tantrums. If he appeared *happy* about the reveal, then it is purely to use as blackmail. Not that the little fool can do so.”

Yue Qingyuan follows behind, steps just loud enough to be heard against the stonepath. They enter the house, a quick flick of a finger lights the hearth. The house has yet to grow cold from the early morning’s fire, and it is a waste of firewood. It does not matter.

Shen Qingqiu intends to ensure there is plenty to burn later.

“This one respectfully disagrees,” Yue Qingyuan replies. He lingers by the middle of the room, a tall silhouette that should inspire respect. Shen Qingqiu takes note of how his fingers twitch by his side, as if wishing to hold onto something. It is a mere blink before it is gone, the man’s hands once more relaxed as he continues, “Xiao-Yuan seemed to truly value the gift for what it was, once he knew.”

“And how did Zhangmen-shixiong know?” Shen Qingqiu asks, sweeping his robes out of the way to sit by his desk, “this one did not sign the damned thing.”

“Xiao-Jiu does not remember?”

Shen Qingqiu’s own fingers twitch. He scowls and unrolls the scroll, thin bamboo rather than paper. The *click-clack* sound of the pieces falling into place is louder than expected, but not loud enough.

He does remember, now when he has been asked to. The red ink had stained his hands, and it had been his fourth attempt to paint without smearing. Yue Qingyuan had sat opposite him, quietly watching. His presence had been muted, and there had been cuts across his fingers. Red and thin and new, the sight of them distracting.

He had thrown another fan at Yue Qingyuan to make him go away.

Shen Qingqiu frowns.

“You never returned the fan,” he says, looking up to see Yue Qingyuan sitting down by the other side of the desk, “did you *steal* from this one?”

“It was not a gift?” Yue Qingyuan asks, but he asks it in such a way that draws to mind dirty streets, of a hollowed cheeked smile as Qi-ge lied about having eaten. A badly told lie, with

not a hint of guilt.

Yue Qingyuan is not lying now; he is, however, just as shameless.

“Does Zhangmen-shixiong often receive gifts in such a manner?” Shen Qingqiu asks incredulously, “do not take this one for a fool!”

Yue Qingyuan’s smile only softens.

“This one would never think of Shidi as one,” he says, and before Shen Qingqiu can reply, the smile falters. “But this one has been.”

“A fool? This is known,” he scoffs.

“Yes,” Yue Qingyuan says, “for this one… for Xiao-Yuan made me realize that I have been foolish. I wish to apologize.”

Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes.

Yue Qingyuan is a man who often apologizes. Each one of them rings hollow, to never be taken seriously. Shen Qingqiu points out his faults, and the man apologizes. One would think it honorable, but Shen Qingqiu knows the truth.

Shen Jiu had asked and was not given answers; only an apology, which answered enough.

This apology is not hollow, but heavy. He does not like it. Change rarely brings good things.

“For what?” he grits out.

Without the sun, Yue Qingyuan’s eyes are dark. The red-brown tint is lost in the shadows, like rocks at the bottom of rivers. If one were to remove them from their home and hold them up towards the sun, they would shine until the sun’s light made them dull and dry once more.

Much like how he would peel away the smiles, Shen Qingqiu briefly entertains gouging out the eyes before him. His nails bite against the bamboo scroll.

“I know that Shen Yuan and Shen Qingqiu are not the same,” Yue Qingyuan says, voice soft, “I thought I knew it before, but I did not. I do know it now. I wish to promise Qingqiu-shidi that I will do better from now on, and I apologize for my shameful behavior until now.”

His voice is soft, but the words tumble like boulders meeting soft ground. Shen Qingqiu puts down the scroll, for he cannot risk breaking it. He let his hands rest in his lap, sleeves brushing against the two swords resting by his waist. When he shifts one arm, wrist against Xiu Ya’s pommel, he feels the sword pulse alongside his own heart.

Stupid.

“Stupid,” he says out loud, mouth dry as he turns his eyes away, “to think that you would

make such a foolish mistake."

"Indeed," Yue Qingyuan replies, "it was foolish and blind. I hope that one day, Shidi will forgive this one for it."

There is an empty teacup at the edge of the desk. It is dark green, with thin slivers of discolored cracks. He knows it has been broken once during his seclusion. He enjoys drinking from it, watching the boy squirm with guilt every time he does.

It was a gift from Yue Qingyuan, given shortly after the theft of the fan, he remembers now. The dark green matches the ink he had used to paint the bamboo onto it. He had been told it was a gift for becoming the head disciple of Qing Jing Peak.

Foolish.

"And how did Shixiong come to this realization?" Shen Qingqiu asks, though his throat feels tight as he does, "was he struck by inspirational lightning from above?"

"Xiao-Yuan's visit–"

The man cuts himself off, but it is too late. Shen Qingqiu snaps his eyes back to him, and sees flustered guilt. The uncomfortable tightness is swiftly replaced with something far more familiar.

"His visit," he says, voice soft and pleasant where his smile is viciously sharp, "to Qiong Ding?"

"Ah, yes."

"I knew the brat must have broken the rules when I returned and did not find him. He must think himself clever, to believe he could get away with it. Him and that little beast of his."

"Shidi–"

"Those two brats can run and hide all they want, but when night falls, this master will *happily* welcome them inside."

Yue Qingyuan sighs, but his eyes have not lost their warmth. There is still a hint of a smile around the corners of the man's mouth, and Shen Qingqiu gets up to make tea, for if the man is to sell out the brats, then he shall sit and stew in the guilt of it where Shen Qingqiu can see him.

He chooses the sweet wild-berry blend, and does not linger on how Yue Qingyuan smiles when he tastes it.

They find Ning Yingying on the rooftop by the training courtyard.

Binghe has to help Shen Yuan get up, his hands not cooperating when he attempts to grab onto the roof edge. But up they get eventually, snow sliding past as they cautiously make their way over the tiles. Behind them, the snow falls into piles on the ground with soft thuds. The training courtyard itself is empty, if one does not count the army of tiny snowmen in various lumpy shapes scattered all about. Some appear to have literally lost their heads.

“Hello,” Shen Yuan says as they sit down, shifting to see what she is doing, “did Shijie have a nice morning?”

Ning Yingying’s fingers are bright pink from the cold; her gloves have been discarded at some point. Perhaps on purpose, as she appears busy tying new ribbons around her sword’s handle. Gradient, it seems. Dark green slowly becomes a bright lime with each wrap of silk.

How many ribbons does she *have?*

“Yes! We built *so* many,” Ning Yingying replies, grinning proudly out over the snowmen covered battlefield, “it took forever, because all the little Qiong Ding babies were so *tiny,* but Shizun stayed anyway when I asked him to, even when the war began. And then I showed him my sword trick!”

Shen Yuan and Binghe exchange a glance.

“What sword trick?” Binghe asks.

“A new one! I hadn’t actually tried it before, but I thought Shizun would find it *so* impressive if I managed it in front of him,” the girl cheerfully explains, and ties off the last ribbon. Hands now free, she wipes at her nose. The winter air, it seems, isn’t agreeing with her. Both her nose, cheeks *and* eyes are matching her pink fingers. Shen Yuan is not going to think about how he was also very snotty earlier.

And then she pouts, suddenly looking more like a meimei than a Shijie as her shoulders slump.

“Shizun didn’t like the trick.”

“A-Ying hasn’t even told us what kind of sword trick it was,” Shen Yuan points out, “if it *was* a really impressive one, then we should know, so we can do it better.”

“A-Yuan doesn’t even have a sword right now,” Ning Yingying says, and sticks her tongue out.

Shen Yuan, as is appropriate, returns the gesture.

“It is not Yuan’s fault that Shizun is keeping it to himself,” Binghe says, “but Shijie still has not told us. Did she manage on the first try, whatever trick it was?”

“Oh! Oh, A-Luo, it would be *so* amazing if we both did it at the same time! So whatI did was, I left Mo Liqin on the ground, and I climbed up onto the roof–”

Oh no.

“– and then I told Shizun to watch, and I called Mo Liqin to me *right* as I jumped off! But then Shizun caught me before I could land on it,” Ning Yingying sighs. “He is so stressed lately, and it made him so upset!”

“Yeah?” Shen Yuan says, incredulous, “of course he was! A-Ying could have stabbed herself!”

“Mo Liqin wouldn’t do that!”

“Shijie is the one in control of her own sword!”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid! I’m your Shijie! I’m even your jiejie!” She complains, “A-Yuan should be respectful, because he is Shidi-didi!”

Shen Yuan rears back. Binghe muffles a laugh.

“How- how would I be *your* didi! If anything, A-Ying would be this one’s meimei!”

“A-Yuan is younger than me! So why would I be meimei? I’m older!”

“In body, but not *soul.”*

Ning Yingying gasps.

“Did A-Yuan just call his Shijie *dumb?”*

Shen Yuan scoffs and crosses his arms, leaning away from her, pressing into Binghe, whose body is shaking from laughter.

“Of course not,” Shen Yuan replies, sarcasm dripping from each word, “I called Yingying a *cheerful and youthful*– ow! Don’t kick me!”

Ning Yingying gives Shen Yuan’s foot another kick. He kicks back, and then both of them squeaks as the snow underneath them moves and takes them with it. It is reflex that has him grab onto Binghe, and Ning Yingying in turn grabs onto him.

“Wait,” Binghe yelps, but it’s too late.

The thud of all three hitting the ground is loud and accompanied by Ning Yingying’s sword clattering to the ground. They lie there in a pile, the snow underneath barely softening their

fall. If it did at all.

Fucking *ouch.*

“Ugh,” Shen Yuan says, and squirms where he has been sandwiched between them. Someone’s elbow is digging into him, and he bets it’s Ning Yingying’s.

Future wife or not, he feels no remorse when he shoves her off of him with a well-placed knee. She flails about and somehow smacks Binghe in the face on her way, which jolts the boy hard enough that Shen Yuan kind of slides off of him. All of the flailing results in both of them on either side of Binghe.

For a moment, they all lay there, bruised and recovering from the most embarrassing near-death experience so far.

“... how did Shizun not take *your* sword?” Shen Yuan finally asks.

In his defense, it’s a good question. If Shen Qingqiu took Fu Yue for being taken as a hostage, then how the fuck does Ning Yingying still have Mo Liqin after nearly killing herself with it?

“Shizun did take Mo Liqin,” Ning Yingying replies, “but this *jiejie* asked for it back really, really nicely!” She pauses. “A-Yuan should try it.”

Shen Yuan stares at a snowman. It’s wonky and leaning precariously, one broken twig as its remaining arm. Someone tried to carve a face into it with their fingers or possibly a stick, but did it a little too deeply and made part of the face fall off.

“What,” he finally says.

“I showed Shizun how sorry I was, and then Shizun gave Mo Liqin back! A-Luo, did A-Yuan hurt his ears earlier today? Where *did* my shidis go this morning, neither of you ever told me-”

Shen Yuan sits up.

“I’m,” he begins. Stops. He doesn’t know what words will fall out if he opens his mouth again. Something foul and awful. He looks at Mo Liqin, still laying there on the ground.

Because Shen Qingqiu took it, and then gave it back.

While Fu Yue–

Because Ning Yingying *asked*–

Shen Yuan’s hands itch with warmth, and if he was not wearing gloves, he imagines they would be glowing. It is a distant thought.

And then Binghe holds Shen Yuan's hands in his own hands and gives them a tight squeeze. Shen Yuan blinks. He inhales, the air cold and biting down his throat, like static within his lungs.

"Yuan?" his best friend asks, and Ning Yingying peers over Binghe. One of her cheeks is pressed against the other boy's head. They look cute like that, he thinks. Two sets of big, worried eyes and one of Ning Yingying's ribbons has draped itself over Binghe.

He wants to rip it off.

Which is bad. It's not- it's not Ning Yingying's fault that Shen Qingqiu is *weird.* It's not her fault that she is spoiled, and most of the time he doesn't even care. Hell, today's plan relied on it! It was all about Shen Qingqiu being unable to tell her *no.* And it worked it.

It's just that it's so unfair.

She is going to get Binghe! Is that not enough? Why must she also get to keep her sword, when Shen Yuan has tried *everything* to get Fu Yue back? Why did *he* get hurt during the damn invasion, when he wasn't even part of the original fucking plot! Why! Why is it that he is always the one lagging behind, even though in the original, Ning Yingying was the least talented one at Qing Jing Peak? Why is it that everyone has this weird dumb idea that Shen Qingqiu *favors* him, when the bastard won't even let Shen Yuan learn how to fight! How will he ever be useful to Binghe if he can't–

"A-Yuan?" Ning Yingying says, and Shen Yuan rips his hands free from Binghe's and stands up.

"I'm going to yell at Shizun," he snarls, and stomps off.

As always, Binghe follows.

He intends to slam the door open; a grand entry of fury, of righteous teenage rebellion and a demand to be heard.

The door, however, is stuck.

Shen Yuan kicks at the edge of it, hating that it does this sometimes. And *never* when Shen Qingqiu is using it! No, always when he and Binghe do. The wood swells from cold and wetness and ice and- he doesn't know. But Shen Yuan has to kick it three times before he can yank it open, and he is so surprised it worked on the *third* try that he nearly falls over from the force.

Binghe is hovering beside him, fretting and worried. Ning Yingying is nowhere to be seen, which is good. Maybe. *Why* she isn't there, he doesn't know, but it's a good thing, so he won't think about it.

It would be better *(safer)* if Binghe left too.

"Wait here," Shen Yuan snaps and slams the door shut behind him. The door fails to fully close, and Shen Yuan hears Binghe follow despite the order. He hears how the other boy closes the door. His chest feels uncomfortably hot, like his heart has become a ball of magma. Shen Yuan flexes his stiff fingers and can *feel* his spiritual veins simmer.

Shen Qingqiu watches them with a raised brow, both hands holding an unrolled scroll. Perfect and scholarly, untouched and cold. Shen Yuan has things to say. Important things, and he knows the best way to be heard by cold, perfect adults is to say things carefully.

"Ning Yingying has her sword!" he says accusingly instead.

Shen Qingqiu looks unimpressed, turning his gaze back onto the scroll he was reading. Dismissing them like they are nothing. Like Shen Yuan isn't worth listening to.

"Is disciple Shen here only to whine about it, or is he here to accept his punishment?" Shen Qingqiu asks.

"What? No! I want my sword back!"

"Disciple Shen has not shown that he can be trusted with it."

"As opposed to Ning Yingying!?" he asks, incredulous.

Green eyes once more look towards him; a narrowed glare switching between him and Binghe, who hovers behind. Shen Yuan glares back, fists clenched and palms warm.

"Do you believe that showing disrespect will earn it back sooner?" the man says, and Shen Yuan can't fucking believe–

"Unfair," he spits out, and it is unfair, much like how it is unfair that the scoff he earns makes him feel like a spoiled brat. He isn't! "A-Ying nearly kills herself being *silly,* but I'm not allowed my own sword because I was attacked? Shizun is being unfair! How will I grow stronger if you *won't let me!"*

The end of the sentence comes out as a yell; it leaves his chest heaving, as if he ran a marathon, rather than yell at the scum villain himself. For a moment, that is all there is. The sound of Shen Yuan catching his breath and the crackling of the fireplace. The scuff of Binghe's shoes as he steps closer.

"Sit down."

“I’m not going to-”

“Sit. *Down.”*

Shen Yuan sits down. A moment later, so did Binghe.

“You two left the peak.”

“We…”

“Despite this master specifically ordering disciple Shen to *remain* on Qing Jing, he did not do so. And disciple Luo assisted in this, no doubt,” Shen Qingqiu continues with a sneer, “and yet, disciple Shen dares to demand his sword? If he had any sense, he would beg for forgiveness and punishment to absolve him of guilt. Instead, he has the nerve to show such disrespect as to raise his voice to this master and demand that which he has not earned.”

Oh, fuck off.

“Not earned? I pulled Fu Yue out myself,” he protests, “and Wei-shishu says one should never separate a sword from its wielder! But Shizun has done so, for *weeks.* Quoting it is for my safety, but how can I be safe if I do not have my sword? Shizun!”

“Disciple Shen will have it back. Once he has *earned it.”*

“But–”

Shen Qingqiu rolls the scroll back up, the click-click of bamboo tiles a sharp warning as he does so. Shen Yuan bites his tongue, and dares not glance towards Binghe. Shen Qingqiu waits a moment longer. Daring them to speak up.

Once it’s clear that they won’t, he continues.

“When disciple Shen has gained full use of his hands, he must prove he has done so with a series of tests, including sword signs and how to handle the fan which this master has gifted him. The sect leader has told this one that disciple Shen *apparently* has good qi control,” Shen Qingqiu’s voice is condescending as he adds, “when he is not ruining his own cultivation with bouts of *idiocy,* that is.”

A pause. Shen Yuan holds his breath. From the corner of his eye, he can see that Binghe does the same. At least he is not the only one who wants to protest, who has to bite back scathing replies to this ridiculous amount of conditions, as if Fu Yue is not *his*–

“Once Mu Qingfang deems that disciple Shen’s meridians and spiritual pathways have fully recovered, there shall be tests to prove this control. Only when disciple Shen has proven to this master that he has fully recovered from the attack and has improved his cultivation, will he be given the sword. Is this understood?”

It is. Except there is something about how he hasn’t mentioned anything else. Fu Yue will be

returned, yes, but… somehow, despite the ridiculous demands, it feels like he is getting off too easy.

“Will this disciple also be allowed outside?” he asks, intently watching Shen Qingqiu’s face, “will this disciple be allowed to leave this peak?”

The fan unfolds; it hides Shen Qingqiu’s mouth, a wall of paper and pine trees and aged brushstrokes. But Shen Yuan knows what those eyes mean, even before the man answers.

“Disciple Shen will be allowed to visit the other peaks. He will *not* be allowed to leave the sect.”

There is a tiny voice telling him to take the deal. He can work out the rest later, and is this not a step forward? He will get Fu Yue back. Later is better than never, surely.

But Binghe sits beside him. Binghe, who needs to hide his heritage, his blood. Binghe who is his best friend and who promised to back him up and who is doing exactly that, even though everyone in the room knows that only Shen Yuan is safe from injury here. Even though Binghe could be hurt.

They need to be able to leave the sect to find the amulet which Wan Qingsheng mentioned. And if they do not find it, then Shen Yuan needs to be able to join the Immortal Alliance Conference. Something he will only be allowed to do if he grows strong enough, *reliable* enough to not make an embarrassment of himself. There are a certain number of missions that need to be fulfilled. Missions he can’t take on if all he does is *stay.* But how the fuck can he convince Shen Qingqiu…?

Shen Yuan takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders.

“This disciple wishes to join the Immortal Alliance Conference,” he says, and before Shen Qingqiu can deny him, he hurriedly continues, “and this disciple thinks Shizun does too!”

“Why would I want *you* to enter a place with hundreds of demons?” Shen Qingqiu huffs, “disciple Shen would be injured before earning a single point.”

Shen Yuan flushes.

“Whether Shizun claims a relation to this one or not, people will talk,” he grits out, fists clenched in his lap, wrinkling the fabric as he continues, “What will they say if this one is not allowed to join? They will assume I’m weak-”

“They would be correct.”

“-which will reflect poorly on Shizun!”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrow. The fan moves idly, shadows caught between the folds of it. It does not close so that he can smack Shen Yuan with it. That, he hopes, is a good sign.

Or a very bad one.

“Please. Shizun, just- just give this one a chance to grow. I want to make Qing Jing proud.”

“Disciple Shen should learn how to lie better.”

“It’s not a lie!” Shen Yuan protests, and it *isn’t.* Not the whole truth, no, but it isn’t a lie. “I want to become a cultivator. Does Shizun intend to just- just keep me here? As a s-servant?”

The scarring at the back of his neck feels like a burning brand. He knows he is imagining it, of course. It is healed. Nothing but pale lines, and no one but him has touched it in years.

And yet he can’t help but reach up to press his hand against it, just to make sure.

“Would it not bring more honor to Shizun, if this one could at least defend himself?” Shen Yuan says, dropping the hand to meet Shen Qingqiu’s eyes once more, “if- if this one could prove himself out there? Binghe is allowed, *Ming Fan* is allowed! Both have been injured as well, it is not fair to- to lock me up here. *Please* Shizun!”

“Lower your voice,” Shen Qingqiu says and snaps the fan shut. He puts it on the desk, and then looks towards two cups. They are mismatched. Shen Yuan sees the green one, the one which Binghe broke. There is also a blue one, a soft shade that makes him think of bird eggs. It’s placed too far away from Shen Qingqiu to have been used by him.

Shen Yuan swallows and keeps quiet, watching. Is there tea in them? Not hot, at least. There is no steam. That feels important. It *is* important.

“.... once disciple Shen is fully recovered, he may be allowed outside,” Shen Qingqiu finally says, “with supervision from this master. If this master is not available, then disciple Shen will be supervised by the person within the peak who has the most successful missions. If Shen Yuan fails *one* of these hunts, he will be denied all future travels. Is this understood?”

Shen Yuan very carefully does not look towards Binghe.

“Yes, Shizun,” he says, and bows, heart beating like a drum within his chest. It’s not the best, but it’s far from nothing.

It could possibly be *everything.*

“Disciple Luo.”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“As punishment for assisting disciple Shen in breaking the rules, *you* will be chopping wood until this master tells you to stop. Is this understood?”

“Yes, Shizun,” Binghe stiffly replies before Shen Yuan can protest.

Shen Qingqiu glares at them both. Then he scoffs, and from under the table, he pulls out–

Oh no.

“Before that, both of you shall share *this* punishment,” he says, opening the jar of the *damn chilis,* “until this master is certain that you have learned your lesson.”

He pushes it towards them. It slides across the wood like death itself.

Shen Yuan and Binghe both hesitate.

“Go on,” Shen Qingqiu says, a slow, nasty smile spreading across his face, *“eat.”*

Chapter End Notes

SY, one chili in: *dying*
SQQ: good
LBH, five chilis in: *tearfully attempts to keep eye contact, face red, nose dripping*
SY, internally: Binghe is so cool...
SQQ: really.

Fun fact, NYY 100% panicked and started crying her eyes out when SQQ took mo liqin. He, being an Immortal Cultivator, panicked, gave it back and then ran away in a very dignified manner. NYY is not going to tell anyone that she cried like a little baby though! Okay!! She is a totally mature sixteen year old girl who doesn't ever cry!

Anyway hi *waves* thank you for your patience! I hope it was worth it <3

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rainbow bridges fucking sucked.

They are why Shang Qinghua is seriously questioning his life decisions. His creative decisions, his everything decisions. It's not the first time he is doing it, sure, whatever, shit sucks. But rainbow bridges? Why did he decide that his story had to have the *magical* kind? Didn't he know that he was going to go all isekai!?

Why didn't he just settle on… wood.

Wood is easy. Boring, sure, but easy! Wood can be made into *so* many bridges (and *papapa* jokes) , and there was a forest nearby, too. Hell, stone! They live on a mountain! Stone is *everywhere!* He tripped on a pebble just the other day!

Instead he settled on magical glass-marble-jade-something material that can only be found in places with high spiritual energy, preferably filled with the pure kind (for the shiny rainbow look) and then it has to be treated with talismans and extremely specific craftsmen and *now it's broken.*

The super expensive, hard to make bridge is *broken* and Shang Qinghua is the peak lord of the *logistics peak.* The peak that needs bridges the most. The peak with the least amount of cultivators who have swords! Because An Ding doesn't care if your cultivation is low, they want carts and able hands who can carry heavy shit or sneaky assholes who can haggle and that is *it.*

Shang Qinghua is a peak lord stuck on delivery duty.

Because the rainbow bridges broke, yes.

It's a mantra. A motto. A curse.

All of the fucking bridges broke, scattered like confetti inbetween the peaks. No more can he pretend he's speeding along the rainbow road of mario kart, for it is broken.

Well. Half-broken, now. It is currently being repaired. An Ding Peak has priority for once in its NPC-existence, the focus being to connect the peak to the most urgent places as quickly as possible. Qian Cao Peak is one of them, as are the peaks dedicated to agriculture and livestock, for obvious reasons. No one wants to sword-fly a whole ox.

Qing Jing Peak is *not* a priority.

This should not be a problem. Shang Qinghua has never been, hm, *eager* to visit that place. It

was beautiful, yeah, sure. It has his protagonist son, and it was the place which Shang Qinghua had described the most in the early story.

It also has Shen Qingqiu, who had been sus of him since he was Shen *Jiu.* And ever since the dude caught him talking to Cucumber-bro alone in a storage… shit has been tense.

Shang Qinghua only visits if *truly* necessary, is the point. Cucumber-bro is the one who has to make the journey to An Ding Peak, because no one can punish Shang Qinghua for welcoming a Shizhi! No one can gut him like a fish for letting a Shizhi into his office! Not even Shen Qingqiu.

Except the bridges broke and they are taking a bazillion years to repair.

And apparently Shen Yuan's sword has been confiscated? What the fuck? Shang Qinghua doesn't know all the details, but he would be blind to not see the kid's beloved sword hanging from Shen Qingqiu's waist.

It's a very unique one, after all. Unnervingly cool-looking for a self-insert.

It's fine. Whatever. Cucumber-bro always claims to be an adult. He can handle a few weeks or months without meeting. It's fine. In fact, he *had* been handling it! Shang Qinghua had been off to do shit for the System, for his King, far away from the demon invasion, and–

Shen Yuan had *promised* to not get mauled by Sha Hualing. He had even promised to not get squished by her big ass demon minions.

The rumor mill says that the guy broke *both* promises.

Qing Jing Peak is unfairly green, even in winter. Shang Qinghua should have grabbed another winter cloak. Something white. Or green. Not the blue-black monstrosity which he got his hands on through some shady deals and a lot of bribes, because Mobei-Jun didn't think to wonder that *maybe* his spy was dying in his stupid ice queen palace, and so Shang Qinghua had to fix it himself.

At least owning the cloak meant that he was the envy of all cultivators. Winter robes from the demonic north were *rare* and also comfier than a thicc man's thighs, and super useful for a shady spy like himself who had to actually spend time in that dick-bitingly cold place.

It just also stood out. A lot. In the snow.

And somewhere, there was a peak lord who wanted to gut him like a fish. Because Shang Qinghua was visiting for no reason. There was a scroll with a green ribbon in his pocket, yes, but it was a bad excuse. Something he could send some lowly minion to deliver.

Which he would, if he got away with this. If Shen Qingqiu never found out that his god-shidi had dared to sully his precious peak and worse, spoken with his grumpy mini-me. If Shang Qinghua could just *find* the one he was looking for, without letting anyone else see him and report his presence, then everything would be fine.

He hunched down by the edge of the bamboo forest, watching as people down below went about their business. If anyone were to look up, hopefully his robes would just look like a really dark rock. There were plenty of weird rocks in this world, after all. Not as many as *flowers,* but–

"Hey!"

Shang Qinghua shrieks. He whirls around even as he scrambles away, nearly sliding down the long hill before he sees who it is. Realizing that death is not imminent, he decides to just fall onto his back. The snow fails to be as fluffy as it appeared, and instead of cushioning his fall it very rudely knocks the air out of him.

"Bro," he groans.

Shen Yuan cackles like the gremlin he is. There is the sound of snow crunching under his boots as he gets closer. Shang Qinghua opens his eyes just in time to see the boy sit down next to him.

"Airplane could be the next scream queen," Shen Yuan tells him, peering over the edge of the hill. "No one heard you, though. Maybe work harder next time."

"I'm more of a moaner," he mutters, and grunts when Shen Yuan smacks him for it.

"Gross," Shen Yuan says, looking him up and down, "what are you doing here?" he asks, and then his eyes widen, "Wait, are you hurt? Did- did *he* visit you again?"

"Bro, you hit me and still ask that? C'mon," Shang Qinghua says, waving him off, as well as the weird, tight feeling in his chest that has no business being there, seeing the pinched worry on Shen Yuan's face, "but I'm fine, dude. I haven't seen my King since the mission ended, *and* he didn't take offense at my mere existence even *once* this time."

Well, maybe once. Or twice. Point was, it had been bruises at the very best, and they had faded *ages* ago. Cucumber-bro didn't need to know.

"Also," he continues, "if you're so worried, why are you trying to kill me? Almost transmigrated *again!* Where did you even come from?" Wait. Shang Qinghua sits up, looking around them. "You're alone? Where's Binghe? Why are *you* here!?"

"I live here?" Shen Yuan replies, incredulous, before snatches one of Shang Qinghua's hands. Any attempts to free himself only earns him a scathing glare, so Shang Qinghua lets Cucumber-bro's icicle fingers slider under his sleeve to touch his pulse.

"I'm fine," he reminds the boy, "which is more than you can say. What the *fuck,* Cucumber-bro. Or should I call you Oathbreaker? Oath-bro? Breaker-bro? Huh?"

"Wha- how am I an oathbreaker?" Shen Yuan splutters, looking up from Shang Qinghua's wrist.

Rich, coming from him. Back in the day, it always felt like Cucumber-bro had the memory of the most bitter elephant. Dude could remember exact sentences from forty chapters back, and always made sure to point out any and all plot holes. And now he can't remember–?

"You promised to not get mauled," Shang Qinghua says.

Snaps, really.

He isn't a guy who snaps, whose voice gets sharp. It's not intentional this time either. It just-happens.

Shen Yuan scowls, looking mulish as he crosses his arms.

"It's not like I was trying to," he says, petulant, fingers twitching in a way that makes Shang Qinghua wonder if he misses a keyboard.

Would years spent in this world have made Cucumber-bro worse or better at leaving insanely long comments of anti-fan nitpicking? If he could, would he make a whole powerpoint presentation to explain *why* it wasn't his fault he got fucking mauled by Airplane's Lingling?

"Bro, from what I heard? You're like a lemming or whatever those things are called. The suicide hamsters! The ones that jump off cliffs."

"That was *staged!* They don't do that!" Shen Yuan protests, "wait, I'm *not* suicidal! Sha Hualing just saw that I look like Shen Qingqiu, and decided to make me her hostage. I didn't– I- why are *you* here, anyway? Huh? If you're not in need of healing, if you're just here to… to fucking *yell* at me, then stand in line. Shizun already does enough of it, I'm not going to take it from you too!"

Cucumber-bro, he would like to know that too. Why the fuck *is* he here?

He stares at the kid, whose face is red and screwed up. He's, what. Fifteen now? Fifteen-and-twenty, if one were to ask Shen Yuan. Practically an adult in this world, except he's so very much still a kid and everything *sucks.* And maybe Shang Qinghua does know why he is here, but he can't just say that. He would rather go and electrocute himself *again.*

"Heard you lost your sword," he blurts out instead, "which means it will take forever before your scrawny ass can visit for more Abyss-planning. I'm here for *you,* bro, show some appreciation! Got any ideas yet?"

Shen Yuan eyes him like he is trying to call him on a bluff. Which is bad, because he is totally pulling out of his ass.

Shang Qinghua heaves a loud sigh.

"Bro. I can't stay here for long, you know? Your Shizun will kill me."

“You seemed fine last time you visited,” Cucumber-bro mutters, before he sighs. “Fine. I actually did find out something, and I have ideas for if I can’t find it but… I overheard, uh. Wen? Wan? Qing-something?”

Oh!

“The buff nerd guy!” Shang Qinghua says, “oh, he’s a *weird* one isn’t he?” A hot one, too. Like *dayum.* He could crush Shang Qinghua’s head between his pecs at any time.

It was possible that Shang Qinghua had spent more than one peak lord meeting daydreaming about sucking on the guy’s ink-stained fingers. Among other things.

“So fucking weird,” Shen Yuan agrees, oblivious to Shang Qinghua’s distraction, “but he said artifacts had gone missing, and one of them sounded useful for hiding Binghe’s problem.”

Problem. That was an understatement.

“It’s not the shapeshifting robes, is it? I totally stole it from other shit, it just makes you into a naked girl. Dunno about you, but I would *not* want to be naked near literal hell,” he cautioned. “And it doesn’t hide anything else, either. I mean it doesn’t hide *anything* to begin with, but you get it.”

Shen Yuan pauses.

“Why would wearing a magical robe turn you into a *naked* girl?” he finally asks, “and why didn’t it show up in the story? That seems like the kind of bullshit you would squeeze in!”

“It totally did! It’s like a callback to sexy jutsu from Naruto! And also a naked emperor thing, y’know, the whole fake robes? Except these robes are real and enchanted to make you want to put them on and- whatever, it’s totally in the story! You wrote a fucking insane comment, bro.” He huffs a laugh. Decades, and he can still remember some of it. “I would’ve thought you’d remember it. It went *viral.”*

“Ah,” Shen Yuan says, and looks shifty.

Shang Qinghua grins.

“You *totally* remember it! I knew you wrote that comment with a rage boner, I bet it was your favorite thing, I *really* went into the feet and the titty fucking-”

“Shut up!” Shen Yuan shrieks, face bright red as he throws snow at Shang Qinghua’s face, “I don’t remember that! I really don’t! And I’m not going to buy the scene either, if it has *feet!”*

“Bro, there is nothing wrong with feet, they can be pretty hot… hold up.” Shang Qinghua sits up straight. “Buy? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Wha- buying! You know what that is, don’t you? You’re literally a glorified merchant,”

Cucumber-bro huffs, eyes flicking upwards in a way that speaks of otherworldly, evil entities.

Shang Qinghua looks towards his own System. It looks normal and foreboding as always.

“You should show respect to your elders, y’know. As the An Ding Peak Lord, I can make your life hell,” he says, though they both know he won’t do shit. Even if he did dare to defy Shen Qingqiu, the benevolent Qi-ge would just swoop in and fix it. It’s even worse now with *Xiao-Yuan* as well. “But no, that’s not what I’m talking about, dude. Buy the scene? Does your System let you do that? Like on paper or virtual reality, because if it’s VR, you are *so* lucky. You can thank me any time for the fap material.”

“You’re disgusting,” Shen Yuan hisses, still the reddest thing on the whole mountain. Shang Qinghua bets that if he cracked an egg on the boy’s face, it would fry. “I don’t mean it like *that.* I mean the- the memory stuff.”

???

Shen Yuan must see the question marks in his face, because the boy falters, looking confused.

“You don’t do that? Spend B-points to get memories of your past life?” he asks, and *what the fuck.*

“No? I’m god! I’m not going to pay to access my own shit!” Shang Qinghua yelps, gaping at Cucumber-bro, “that’s what you have been doing? Holy shit!”

“You seriously *haven’t?”*

“Bro, how would I survive? Fuck, how did *you?* Where were you before all this? You were tiny when we met, how…”

“It’s not important.”

“Dude-”

“It’s not important!” Shen Yuan snaps.

Shang Qinghua shuts his mouth, fully taking in the boy. The way the blush has faded away, leaving Shen Yuan looking paler than the snow all around them. How the guy is avoiding eye contact, shoulders tense and back hunched in a way that makes him shrink.

Shang Qinghua remembers the backstory he created for a different Shen, and suddenly feels sick. Just how similar are they? Do Shen Yuan and Qingqiu share more than just a face? Have they both–

The thought is unwelcome. He shoves it away.

"... alright," he says instead with forced casualness, "so tell me about that artifact then."

"It's a pendant," Shen Yuan says as he begins to form a little ball of snow. Still not looking at Shang Qinghua, which is fine. He is a big fan of avoiding eye contact in all situations. Also a big fan of moving past whatever landmine he stepped on, and thankfully so is Cucumber-bro. Who needs to talk about trauma? Not them. "Wan Qingwhoever said it conceals demons. I thought… okay, so, my original idea was to figure out a way to conceal a demon's presence. Cultivators only know how to reveal, not how to hide. Binghe and I have been reading up on it-"

"He knows you know?" Shang Qinghua blurts out.

"Binghe even told me himself," Shen Yuan replies, and despite being interrupted, he looks pleased. Not even smug. Just- just pleased. Not so much a cat who caught a canary, but rather a cat who found a warm lap to curl up in, "and of course I promised him the secret is safe with me."

Huh.

"Did you know he didn't even tell Ning Yingying in the original?"

"A-Ying can't keep a secret," Shen Yuan scoffs, carefully placing a tinier snowball on top of the one he already made, "and Binghe is smart. Of course he wouldn't tell her. But he knows *I* keep secrets just fine. Anyway, that's- that's not what we're talking about."

"Right, pendant, hiding demons, blah blah."

"It was described as having a silver chain, and the actual pendant was some kind of fish? But that's all the description we heard. Do you recognize it?"

Shang Qinghua purses his lips, thinking. There aren't as many fish-themed things in *Proud Immortal Demon Way* as flowers, but that doesn't say much. There are a bunch of things he described. Most of it was shit like siren songs or underwater breathing things. Binghe had used *that* one a few times to swim into the castle of some dragon lord to seduce away a princess. Once he got a dragon *milf.*

But a fish pendant that hides demons?

"Nah," he says, "I can't even remember drafting it. I mean, what does fish have to do with hiding, anyway?"

"Some fish look nearly invisible underwater," Shen Yuan points out, finally looking up from his miniature snowman. It has tiny ears, like a hamster. Is it a suicide one? "Maybe that's what it would do. Just… make the wearer fully undetectable, vision and all."

"There are *so* many other things for that!"

"But none that hides demons, right?"

“Ugh. I mean, there are a few who hides qi, but–

“But Binghe will have a glowing demon mark and- and claws and stuff. He needs to hide all signs, not just his qi,” Shen Yuan finishes. He looks down at the tiny hamster. It balances precariously close to the edge of the hill. “If Binghe and I can’t find the pendant, or invent some new way to hide a demon, then I guess we just have to run away. But *where?* We can’t go to Huan Hua Palace, because Binghe would be a demon and even if they somehow accepted *that,* Shen Qingqiu would murder me for it anyway.”

“I mean, the original went and got my King as a backup,” Shang Qinghua points out, “I could get Binghe there if I groveled enough. Though I dunno if *you* should go there. It’s freezing as fuck. Might even be better if you stay behind. My son can just fake his death and pop up like a miracle whenever he figures out how to hide his demon side!”

“I’m not leaving Binghe alone with *him,”* Shen Yuan says, cold and firm enough to be a glacier, “Mobei-Jun would just kill him, anyway. Binghe will be at his most vulnerable, I’m not- I’m *not.* Alright? I don’t even want *you* to-” Shen Yuan breaks off.

Shang Qinghua grimaces.

“Fine. I’ll look around, see if I can find a fish pendant or… or hidey holes if shit goes wrong. Deal?”

Shen Yuan looks at the snow hamster he made. After a moment, he pokes it just hard enough to tip it over.

They both watch as it rolls down the hill, pieces breaking off until it’s unrecognizable.

“Deal,” Shen Yuan says.

It sounds final.

Shang Qinghua hates that, but they still shake on it. Neither of them bring up the risk of failure.

Something tells him that Shen Yuan doesn’t see it as an option.

"... who wore those robes, by the way?"

"Oh, Ning Yingying got tricked into it by the Little Palace Mistress."

"That fucking *bitch."*

For three days now, Binghe has been chopping wood in between lessons while Shen Yuan has been diligently working on his hand mobility. Only half of those times has allowed him to tag along, to keep Binghe company as his friend travels all over the peak to chop down whatever area that Shen Qingqiu has deemed worthy of, uh, beheading.

Deforesting? Barbershopping? Demolishing? Well, it's not *that* bad. Binghe can only chop down so much with a blunt axe. Because it is blunt; his friend has to strengthen it with spiritual energy for every swing, which is exhausting all on its own. Shen Yuan feels a bit inadequate, sitting on a log and squeezing a wooden ball that Ming Fan gave him to carry around.

Ning Yingying gave him one too, two days ago. It's painted in cheerful colors, all kinds of flowers sprawling over it. Some of them are smeared, from whenever Ning Yingying had to adjust her grip. Fingerprints in bright orange and green.

That one is back in their room. When Binghe asked, Shen Yuan had said it was to keep it safe.

Binghe hadn't looked very convinced. *Maybe* because Shen Yuan has kind of been… avoiding her.

Avoiding is a strong word.

They all have lunch together, every day. Just like normal. Things are *normal.* There is no reason for it not to be. Shen Qingqiu has given him goals to reach for, and everything will be fine. Soon, Shen Yuan will hold Fu Yue again. Soon, he and Binghe can leave the mountain to track down the fish pendant, and Ning Yingying will stay back because of secrets that need to *stay* secret and she is, as he told Airplane, notoriously bad at keeping them.

It's nothing personal. She is- it's *fine.* They are fine.

Binghe leans the axe against a tree. The protagonist stretches, exhaling a cloud of breath. There is a haphazard pile of chopped wood next to him, though Shen Yuan knows that it will soon be neatly stacked away in a woodshed near the bamboo house. Soon, there will be no

space left.

Not until the next time Shen Qingqiu keeps the fire lit out of pure spite.

“How much does Binghe think he has to chop today?” Shen Yuan asks, digging his nail into a dent in the ball. He doesn’t know if it was there before he got it, or if he is responsible for it. “Surely he will be done soon?”

“Is Yuan bored?” Binghe asks, smoothing a hand over his head. His fingers linger at a braid there, one which Shen Yuan had put in that same morning. If nothing else, at least he can see his hands improving just by looking at Binghe’s hair. They are way less crooked these days! Not perfect yet, but it’s getting there. “I don’t think I will be done in a while. If Yuan is bored, maybe he could go and find Shijie…?”

Shen Yuan frowns and looks down at the ball in his hand. Plain, brown. Polished into smoothness. Except for the little dent.

“Shijie is surely busy,” he replies, “and it is not like I can do much, anyway. Not unless I want to sit and practice calligraphy in front of Shizun.” Which fucking *sucked.* He was already bad at it! He had *always* been bad at it! He didn’t need Shen Qingqiu glancing at his work every tenth second just to drop some *encouraging* little remark about how Shen Yuan’s brushstrokes rivaled that of an errant bird pecking for seeds, alright! He knew that already!

“... is Yuan still upset about Shijie keeping her sword?”

“No!”

“Then why is-”

“I’m *not* avoiding her.”

Binghe sighs. There is the sound of snow crunching, before the other boy sits down next to him. Shen Yuan glares at the ball. He squeezes it hard enough that his palm aches with it, and then Binghe’s hands are covering his.

“Yuan should be wearing his gloves,” Binghe says, tugging the hands closer to himself, warming them. Shen Yuan briefly considers yanking them away, but, well. Binghe *is* a furnace, even without gloves on. And it would make him sad. So he keeps his hands still.

“I can’t do the exercises with them on,” he defends himself, which is true. “I- don’t remove *yours,* Binghe, I have some in my pocket,” Shen Yuan says when Binghe moves to do exactly that.

“Fine,” Binge replies, taking Shen Yuan’s hands back to warm them again, “but Yuan *is* avoiding Shijie.”

Ugh.

“I’m not,” he mutters, “I’m just busy. As are you. You’re just- just saying that because *you* miss her, I bet.”

“Yuan runs away every time she tries to join us,” Binghe says, ignoring the last comment, “that is called avoiding. I only don’t understand why. We have always known that Shen Qingqiu-”

“Shizun.”

“That *Shizun* favors her. It’s why you thought it would be good if Shijie was the one to distract him, was it not? So why is it that Yuan is still so upset about… about Shizun *not* taking her sword?”

“I’m not! But if Binghe misses her company so much, then maybe he should go and keep her company instead,” Shen Yuan snaps, yanking his hands away. He shoves the ball into one pocket, then digs for his gloves in the other, “I won’t disturb you two if you do!”

“What? Yuan?” his friend says, confused, hands chasing after his, “that is not what I’m- Yuan!”

“Bye!” Shen Yuan yells over his shoulder, feeling uncomfortably jittery, as if his insides are itchy, “have fun with- oof!”

He stumbles backwards.

When he looks up, he meets the brown eyes of Ning Yingying. She stares at him. All *wet.* Like a sad dog, or something. Except her face grows redder for each silent second as they stare at each other.

Ning Yingying puffs up her cheeks.

“I knew A-Yuan was mad!” she yells, “I knew it! It’s not *fair!”*

“Wha- not fair?” Shen Yuan splutters, gesturing at her- well, at her! “Look at *you!* Shijie has no right to talk about fairness!”

“What does that mean!”

“It means what it means!” he yells back, even though he has no fucking clue. He just knows that he is right, that seeing Mo Liqin by her waist makes him want to yell even louder, that seeing her being- being *Ning Yingying* is suddenly the worst thing ever.

And it’s not fair, he knows, to her or him, but he is *right.* He just doesn’t know what, exactly, he is right about. But he is, and that is all that matters! He kicks snow at her, just because he can. She kicks snow back, and manages to send a rock at his shin too. Shen Yuan snarls and kicks the rock back at her.

“Wait- Shijie, Yuan-”

“A-Luo *always* takes A-Yuan’s side too!”

“Don’t yell at Binghe!”

“Don’t yell at *me!”*

Binghe steps between them, hands up, looking frazzled.

“If everyone would stop yelling, then we could talk,” Binghe says, so reasonable, so *patient,* and he always was like that, wasn’t he? Even in the original, he always was so forgiving whenever Ning Yingying stumbled along, bringing trouble to him, because Ning Yingying was pretty and cute and sweet and a future fucking wife.

It’s infuriating.

“I’m not talking,” he snaps and smooths out his robes in angry, jerking movements, “you two can! I don’t care! I’m *busy,* unlike some who can just- just laze about!”

“I’m not lazy! I’m working hard too!” Ning Yingying protests, “A-Yuan is being unfair!”

“What’s unfair is *you!* Yingying always get to- you get to do *everything,* and you never get punished, not ever! You are just a spoiled brat, just like those Bai Zhan guys said! I hate you!”

Ning Yingying takes a step back. Binghe stands frozen, dark eyes flicking between them. Shen Yuan’s chest is heaving. He hears a rushing in his ears, like crashing waves, and for a moment he feels nothing but vicious satisfaction.

And then Ning Yingying’s bottom lip trembles.

“A-Yuan doesn’t mean that,” she says, and Shen Yuan stares at her and stares at Binghe, who stares right back and- and he can’t read Binghe’s face, because it is blank in the way Binghe gets when he doesn’t know how to respond. But Ning Yingying looks like she is about to cry and- and *why* did he say–?

Shen Yuan runs.

There aren’t many places to hide on Qing Jing Peak.

Binghe knows all of them, and Ning Yingying knows many as well. Even Ming Fan and

Heng He have learned of some in their quest to herd them all to their chores, or to catch them in the act of causing trouble. Chen Xiaoling has probably discovered the ones which the rest of them have outgrown by now.

So there are not many places to hide, not truly. Which is why he ends up on the stone bench outside of the bamboo house.

It's out in the open, but Shen Qingqiu is inside. Shen Yuan has the vague idea that maybe, just maybe, the mere presence of the scum villain will ensure he keeps his stupid fucking mouth *shut.*

The icicles are dripping.

It is the only sign that spring is on its way. The snow remains all around them, thick piles of it that grows ever higher every time there is another snowfall. But there, from the icicles that line the roof of the bamboo house, water drips.

Shen Yuan sits in the sun, squeezing the stupid fucking wooden ball and feels horribly nauseous and numb and sweaty all at once.

He doesn't know why he said that.

Now when he sits on the bench, snow melting against his butt and cheeks burning from the cold air and the sprint he made all the way through snow and up the stairs-

He doesn't know why he said that, and Shen Yuan doesn't even know what he was thinking during *all* of it. None of it makes sense. He doesn't- he doesn't yell. Not things like that. He doesn't want to be the kind of person who yells shit just to… to *hurt.*

Except he has done it before.

Shen Yuan stares down at the ball in his hand. He can see the little dent in it from this angle, and he thinks about the times he has yelled. At Shen Qingqiu, at Ning Yingying, at Shang Qinghua. He has even yelled at *Binghe.*

He can't remember if he ever apologized.

That's a thing he should do. Like, immediately. It's the right thing to do. It's what a good friend does, and isn't that the goal? To be a good friend? Good enough that Binghe will value him even after he becomes an emperor?

Binghe thinks he is a good friend. He must have, to tell him about being a demon. Shen Yuan somehow managed to trick him, because right now, all the evidence is saying he is not. He is the worst kind of friend, some two-faced bitch who just… says shit.

Shen Yuan sits, and he wonders if he should set the ball on fire. It would be easy; just a little bit of focus, and bam, qi-fueled fire. But then Ming Fan would have to go and get a new one from Mu Qingfang.

How long has it been since he last saw Mu Qingfang? Wei Qingwei? Hell, even Zhu Kang. Not to speak about Lin Jie. Last time he saw the boy was when Liu Qingge–

“Is your master inside.”

Shen Yuan throws the ball as hard as he can; it connects with a firm chest clad in white and blue, before it falls down to the stone steps. He stares at it until it comes to a stop against a black boot.

Slowly he looks up.

Liu Qingge stares at him.

Shen Yuan tucks his hands inside of his sleeves. His heart had shot up his throat at the surprise, and it’s not coming back down. He threw a ball at Liu Qingge. At the war god.

“Your aim needs improving,” the man says, and Shen Yuan blinks.

“What?”

“You should have aimed for my face,” Liu Qingge explains, nimbly kicking the ball up into his hand. He didn’t have to bend down at all. It’s just there now, in his palm, and Shen Yuan watches as Liu Qingge frowns down at it, “though it would have done no damage. What is this? A toy?”

“... no, Shishu. It’s- it’s a medical tool.”

“How?”

“Um. My hands, they, that is.” Shen Yuan’s tongue feels too big for his mouth. He resists the urge to look behind himself, to look at the window which faces Shen Qingqiu’s desk.

Surely the man can hear them. Can hear that Liu Qingge is outside. Why hasn’t he come outside? Not that he should. It’s just Shen Yuan here. If they come to blows, well, what can he do? Stop them? Haha! No.

“The demon invasion,” he tries, and Liu Qingge gives a sharp nod before he can continue.

“Rehabilitation,” the man says. He says it with deep disgust; the tone of a man who has suffered through the horrors. Shen Yuan imagines the war god squeezing little wooden balls, and promptly bluescreens.

“Yeah,” he says, feeling dazed, “um, yeah. That. For my hands. This one’s hand. This one is being rude, what- what did Shishu need of this one?”

Liu Qingge raises one perfect eyebrow. He really doesn’t look anything like how Shen Yuan imagined.

“Shen Qingqiu. Is he inside?”

“Yes, Shishu. Does Shishu wish for this one to announce his arrival?”

“No.”

And then the man doesn’t move.
Just. Stands there. Staring.

Would it be rude to stare back? Probably. But Liu Qingge is a rude man, so maybe that is fine? Should he ask about Lin Jie? Or maybe for the ball back? Or- or maybe he should ask *why* he is here, at Qing Jing Peak. Especially after last time.

Maybe Shen Yuan should just leave. No one would fault him.

But if he leaves, he might run into Binghe. Might run into Ning Yingying.

Shen Yuan’s nails dig into his palm.

“Does he treat you well?”

Shen Yuan’s eyes snap back to Liu Qingge’s.

“Huh?”

“Does your master treat you well?” Liu Qingge asks. The words are awkward and stiff, almost angry. As if he is attempting to parry, as if words can be a sword, but one he is not used to wielding.

“Yes,” Shen Yuan says, and is surprised to mean it.

They do not always get along, and Shen Qingqiu isn’t nice. He has impossible standards, insane demands and stupid conditions. But Shen Yuan remembers robes stained with fruit, and he remembers how Shen Qingqiu’s qi flows through his veins every evening. He remembers, fuzzy and faraway, the feeling of being carried all the way to Qian Cao Peak as his own meridians unraveled. Shen Yuan remembers how the man has never once grabbed him by the hair.

“Good,” Liu Qingge says, as if Shen Yuan’s entire world view hasn’t been turned over for the third time that day, and then he walks past him and to the door, throwing the ball to him as he does. Shen Yuan barely catches it.

He twists in his seat to watch, and yup, there Liu Qingge goes. Opening the door without knocking, not even stopping to think about it.

“Shen Qingqiu,” he says, staying in the doorway.

“Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu replies, and when Shen Yuan peeks through the window, he can see how stiffly his Shizun sits. Eyes narrowed and hands out of sight, probably gripping a hidden knife. “Here to question this one’s loyalties again?”

“No,” Liu Qingge says, “I am here to apologize.”

What?

“What,” Shen Qingqiu says, Shen Yuan mouthing the same.

“You heard me,” Liu Qingge says, and at last he steps inside, the door closing behind him and–

What?

Shen Yuan stares at the window, watching as Liu Qingge gets closer to the desk. Shen Qingqiu is bristling, but their mouths are moving. Liu Qingge’s hands stay away from his sword.

Liu Qingge is actually apologizing.

To Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Yuan stares, mind whirling. Slowly, he turns his gaze forwards and down. In the distance, he can see the dormitories. He squeezes the ball in his hand, now a little wet and cold from having been on the ground.

Shen Yuan stands up and takes a deep breath.

He can do this.

It’s what friends do.

Chapter End Notes

SY: Repress!! Suppress!! Conceal don't feel! I'm fine! This is healthy behavior and won't lead to anything!
One Hour Later:
LBH: *in shock*
SY: wow where did that come from. who could have predicted this.
MQF: *looks into the camera*

~

LQG: I am here to apologize.
SQQ:
SQQ: perhaps Shidi should be the one to pay a visit to Hong Jing.

Haha, wow, that sure came out of nowhere! Gosh, SY, why did you do that indeed? Something bothering you???

Anyway. Every time I think to myself I'm one chapter away from a time-skip, more things happen. How is this possible? A friend of mine (you know who you are) joked that I won't time-skip until the next year at this point and guys, they might be right. Help.

But!!! thank you all for being so patient! I appreciate it so much, you guys have no idea. And I hope whatever winter holidays you celebrate, that you will all have a good time with it. Thanks as always for reading <3

talesfromnatea has drawn a lovely portrait of SY and SQQ side by side, with matching fans <3

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ning Yingying's pillow is wet.

She turns her face away from it, but that just makes it so that her cheek is pressed against the wet spot instead. It's uncomfortable and gross, but she doesn't want to move. She doesn't want to leave the dormitories, empty of others, and risk having someone like Ming Fan see her. He always gets so *weird* about crying. Weirdest about her. It's stupid.

Ning Yingying isn't even crying anymore! It's just sniffles and gross snot that she wipes away with a clumsy hand. Not like when she had first ran to the dormitories. She is *practically* done being a big baby.

But she still doesn't want to leave her bed.

That, and A-Luo is next to her. He sits on her bed, one leg pulled up, the other hanging off of it. There is a gentle tugging as he carefully combs her hair, the empty room filled with the soft sound of him humming a song she doesn't recognize. It is nice. A-Luo is *nice,* possibly the nicest person on the whole peak. Maybe even the sect. Because he is combing her hair, even though it is 'inappropriate' to do so. Just because she asked him to.

Shen Yuan would be mad if he saw them, she thinks.

Good.

Except it isn't good. Ning Yingying bites her lip, eyes stinging and face feeling hot. She doesn't *want* A-Yuan to be mad at them. She doesn't want him to be mad at *her.* Ning Yingying can't even remember what started it all, she just remembers how it ended.

"Shijie?"

"I'm *fine,"* she sniffles, rubbing her nose against her pillow, "I'm f-fine."

"... it's fine if Shijie isn't," Luo Binghe says. He speaks like he is trying to pet a scared dog. Ning Yingying flips the pillow over, even though she wants to throw it in his face. She isn't mad at *him.* "It's never fun when we fight."

"A-Luo didn't fight. A-Luo tried to *stop* the fight," she points out.

"I think," Luo Binghe says, slow and hesitant, pulling the comb away, "that Yuan and I were fighting before Shijie arrived."

Ning Yingying sits up, turning to stare at him.

“But you never fight!” she blurts out.

“Shijie *knows* we have fought before. Shijie has seen it.”

“But those weren’t real. Except when we- with the little ghost- but that was *both* of us, not just you two.” She knows she is right. Throughout the years, Ning Yingying thinks she can count on one hand the times that Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan fought. Not bicker, not teasing, not annoying each other. But actually *fought.*

There was the time Shen Yuan was being silly and tried to sleep in the woodshed, and she *thinks* maybe they had a fight that one time they didn’t hug goodbye, though A-Yuan had refused to tell her and A-Luo hadn’t said anything either when he returned- he just turned very red. There is also one time when they got *really* mad at each other over a story book, where Luo Binghe insisted one character was *very, very bad* and Shen Yuan insisted that the guy had *hidden depths*. Or something. The book hadn’t been all that fun to read anyway, so Ning Yingying hadn’t seen the point of being so angry about it.

They had still made up before the day was over.

Point was, they didn’t fight. Ning Yingying stares at Luo Binghe, who in turn looks down at the comb in his hands. It’s one she has made herself, made of dark wood which Shizun had given to her before he left for the caves. Ning Yingying is proud of how thin the teeth are; of how detailed she has managed to make the flower patterns on the handle.

“What did you fight about?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Ugh. A-Yuan is so annoying!”

“Shijie.”

“He *is*. A-Luo can’t tell me that *he* started the fight. It was A-Yuan, wasn’t it? Especially if A-Luo doesn’t even know. Just- just like how I don’t know–”

“But Shijie *does* know.”

“No I don’t!”

Luo Binghe just looks at her, and she wilts. Not even Shizun looks at her in such a way. Ming Fan has tried, at times, but he has never quite managed to nail it. But Luo Binghe? Somehow, his disappointed look brings to mind memories which Ning Yingying struggles to properly remember, of a mother who scolded her for being naughty. He makes her want to scuff her feet and beg for forgiveness.

Especially now. Because she *does* know.

Perhaps not how it started, but she does know what they were fighting about. Ning Yingying looks away from Luo Binghe's disappointment.

"It's not fair," she says. "I'm not spoiled."

Luo Binghe says nothing.

"I'm *not."*

"Shizun favors Shijie," Luo Binghe says, "and Zhangmen-shibo favors Yuan. Being taken care of does not mean you are bad, Shijie. Yuan knows that."

"Then why did he…"

"Yuan has a lot on his mind. I think he needed to yell at someone, and Shijie and I were just… unlucky."

"That's stupid," Ning Yingying says, because it is. But it also makes sense. Luo Binghe is very good at that. Making sense. She doesn't know why Shizun is always so grumpy about him; not when Shizun always complains that the whole sect is made of idiots.

Shizun also rarely makes sense, but she still loves him. Just like how she still loves Shen Yuan, even if he *was* being rather mean today.

"Maybe a little," Luo Binghe allows, "but Yuan has had trouble sleeping since the attack, and Shizun won't give his sword back. And… and I think he misses Mu-shishu. So I hope that when Yuan comes and apologizes, that Shijie will accept it. Because Yuan needs it, especially when he makes mistakes."

"What if he doesn't apologize? What if he *meant it?* What then, A-Luo!"

Luo Binghe huffs.

"It's *Yuan,"* he says, as if that means anything. Except it does. Because it *is* Shen Yuan. A-Yuan who teaches little ghosts how to read, even when they bite him. Who likes weird, creepy monsters more than he likes fluffy bunnies and cute kittens. Who likes Shizun, even though they all know that Shizun isn't the nicest.

Shen Yuan likes ugly things, and Ning Yingying feels very ugly right then. Mo Liqin rests against the bed, ribbons orange for the day. She remembers how Shizun had taken Mo Liqin days ago, for once *so* angry that Ning Yingying hadn't been sure he would listen to her. His lips had been thin.

She hadn't meant to start crying then. The tears had just bubbled up, choking her until she hiccuped with them. Shizun had returned Mo Liqin, and he had kept Fu Yue.

Ning Yingying had been *happy* about it. Not just about getting Mo Liqin back, but also that A-Yuan didn't have Fu Yue, because if he didn't have Fu Yue, then he had to *stay.* Where it

was safe.

It's an ugly thought.

But not the kind of ugly that Shen Yuan likes. Because it is an unfair thought, most of all, and Ning Yingying never wants to be unfair. She reaches out and wraps one of Mo Liqin's ribbons around her finger, the orange gleaming like tangerines in the sunlight that shines through the window.

"I don't want to be spoiled," she says, and it's just a little bit of a lie, because gifts are nice, and Ning Yingying likes being loved. Mostly she wants everyone to stop babying her.

Luo Binghe doesn't baby her. She didn't think Shen Yuan did either, and maybe he still doesn't. He just thinks she is stupid instead.

Ning Yingying doesn't want to be stupid either.

Luo Binghe shifts closer, their shoulders bumping. Ning Yingying turns to look at him as she tries to clean her wet cheeks with her sleeves, and she sees him open his mouth to reply.

The door opens behind them.

"Is A-Ying here?" Shen Yuan calls out, before he stops in the doorway. The wind blows past him, cold as ice, but Shen Yuan doesn't seem to notice. He just stares at them, his green eyes wide.

"Yuan," Luo Binghe says, relieved, and stands up, "yes, Shijie is right here. Is- does Yuan want me to stay or leave?"

No, don't leave, Ning Yingying wants to say, and she has to clutch at her blanket to stop from reaching out, to not grab at A-Luo's sleeves to make him stay.

Shen Yuan swallows and gives a nod, all sharp and awkward. Like he is a patched together doll at a play, and the puppeteer doesn't want to make the head fly off.

"If- if Binghe thinks it's best, then he can leave," he mumbles.

Luo Binghe stops by him. Ning Yingying watches as Luo Binghe looks at Shen Yuan, as Shen Yuan refuses to look at him in turn.

"I can stay. If Yuan wants me to," Luo Binghe says.

Slowly, Shen Yuan looks at him. Their eyes meet, and it's weird. Ning Yingying is the one who sleeps in the dormitories; A-Luo and A-Yuan haven't for years. And yet it feels like *she* should be the one leaving. She frowns, and grabs the comb that Luo Binghe left on her bed.

"No," Shen Yuan says behind her, "I'm fine. Thank you, Binghe."

The door closes. Ning Yingying feels the comb's teeth dig into her palm as she clutches it, her throat feeling tight and awful as Shen Yuan slowly comes over.

"... can I sit down?"

"I guess," Ning Yingying says, and tries to look like she hasn't cried since they last saw each other.

Shen Yuan sits down next to her, leaving a gap between them.

Silence.

Ning Yingying bites her lip to keep quiet. She puts the comb aside, smooths out the wrinkles in her uniform. She sits with her legs crossed, and pulls the pants tight. Now, as Ning Yingying shifts, she can feel how the fabric presses down against the rough parts of her legs- the parts where she bled while running through Qiong Ding to get Liu-shishu, to get back before all her friends died to demons, tripping and falling in her haste. Ning Yingying remembers running, but she still can't remember getting hurt. Shizun had to point it out.

The healers said the scars will fade, but never quite go away. A-Yuan hates it, she knows. But Ning Yingying likes it.

She presses the palm of her hand against one of them. Digs her nails in, just a bit, to distract herself because she can't speak *first.* She doesn't know what will come out, and she doesn't want to be angry or make Shen Yuan angry either. Even if she is a little bit angry still.

Shen Yuan shifts next to her.

"Um," he says, "Shijie's hair isn't tied up."

Ning Yingying touches her hair. Pulls a lock in front of her, and looks at it. There is a little bit of copper in the brown, when she holds it against the sunlight. It's pretty, and it's getting very long now. Long enough for fancy braids, the kinds she can't figure out how to make herself. Ning Yingying lets it go.

"A-Luo combed it," she says.

"He did?"

Ning Yingying frowns at him.

"He did," she says, and picks up the comb again, pressing her thumb against the teeth of it, "why is A-Yuan here?"

Shen Yuan opens his mouth, and then he closes it. Like the funny little mushrooms in Mu-shishu's garden, the ones that are always chewing on chicken bones. Open, close, open, close. It's like he doesn't know words anymore, and Ning Yingying wishes that A-Luo had stayed.

“I can braid your hair!” Shen Yuan blurts out, and–

That’s not right? Ning Yingying stares, her grip on the comb loosening as she gapes at him. Her shidi’s face is growing redder, like when she spilled ink over white cloth, a bright red that gradually became pink. Except reverse, because A-Yuan is pink and then he is *red* and–

Shen Yuan hasn’t *ever* braided her hair. He only braids Luo Binghe’s. He doesn’t even braid his own hair, which is weird but he has always been weird about his hair. Or, well, he has since Zhao De cut it. But.

Now he wants to braid her hair?

Ning Yingying stares at him, and he looks everywhere else but her. So he *doesn’t* want to braid her hair. He just said it, because… because he thought it would make her happy? Should she say yes? She *wants* to say yes. Shen Yuan’s braids are always the best, and A-Luo has always looked very pretty in them. Even the ones that A-Yuan only makes for practice, the ones that he doesn’t let A-Luo walk around in. Not even Shizun knows how to give her braids like that.

But A-Yuan doesn’t actually *want* to braid her hair. So she should say no, because that is the nice and adult thing to do. Except Ning Yingying wants to say yes anyway, because she *wants it,* and because she is still a little angry and maybe a lot of hurt and it would serve him right and–

Ning Yingying puffs up her cheeks, and then she blows all the air out as loudly as she can. It makes Shen Yuan jump, and Ning Yingying tugs at one of Mo Liqin’s ribbons.

“A-Yuan doesn’t have to braid my hair,” she grudgingly says, “I’ll still forgive you.”

“That’s not- I haven’t even said sorry yet!” A-Yuan splutters.

He’s so stupid!

“A-Yuan offering to braid my hair *is* A-Yuan saying sorry,” she replies.

When she looks at him, he is the one biting at his lips, not her. It takes ages before he finally shakes his head, forcing himself to look at her.

“I should still–”

“But A-Yuan doesn’t *have to,”* Ning Yingying cuts him off, rubbing at her eyes. Not because she is going to cry or anything, they are just *itchy.* Because she is allergic to stupid boys, and A-Yuan is being *stupid.* “Shizun doesn’t apologize either! Not with words. A-Yuan and Shizun are the same, so I get it. Shidi didn’t mean what he said. But A-Yuan is really bad at saying sorry, so you *show* that you’re sorry instead. And I forgive you. Only people who *want* to braid my hair get to do it.”

Ning Yingying flops down on the bed, grabs her pillow and hides her face with it. Because

her eyes are itchy and Shen Yuan is bad at saying sorry, but A-Luo is *right.* Even if she really, really wants him to braid her hair, she can't. Because she isn't a baby who just forces others to do things they don't want to. And A-Yuan always forces himself to do things he doesn't want to, just because someone else is sad.

"No," Shen Yuan says.

She groans and peeks past the pillow.

"A-Yuan," she says, but he cuts her off.

"I'm going to braid your hair," he says, scowling like he does when they practice swords and she tries to kick sand at him, like she is the one being silly, not him, *"and* I'm going to apologize. So Shijie has to sit up."

Ning Yingying huffs at him; until he pokes her in the side, making her yelp and sit up straight, squirming away.

"Good," Shen Yuan says and grabs the comb, "I need ribbons too, and for Shijie to turn around. Does Shijie know what kind of braids she wants?"

"No?" she says, fumbling to get the ribbons she has stored away, feeling too- *something* to figure out what colors or length, she just grabs all of them and dumps them in Shen Yuan's lap, and then he pokes her into turning around.

"Is A-Ying sure?" he asks.

Ning Yingying isn't. Not at all! She *always* wanted him to braid her hair, she always had so many ideas of what kinds, but now? Now they're gone, and Ning Yingying can't remember a single one. She had a list! It's gone! All she can do is shake her head.

"I can't do anything too fancy," Shen Yuan says behind her, and she can feel how he gathers up her hair, how he carefully drags the comb through it. It doesn't catch, of course. Luo Binghe was very thorough, "my… my hands are still not the best. But this one can do the loops that A-Ying likes."

"... I always have those," she says, which is true. But she *does* like them. But A-Yuan might never, ever braid her hair again. Even now it doesn't feel real. So- so should she ask for something new?

"Yeah, true. Um. What if…" he trails off.

"What if?"

"There's a style. I haven't done it much, but- it would leave A-Ying's hair hanging loose. Mostly. But I think you will like it? Especially with ribbons…"

Loose? Ning Yingying bites at her lip, smoothing her hands over her knees. She doesn't

always tie her hair up in buns and loops and such, but wearing her hair loose isn't really something she does. It's long and gets in the way, even if she wants to look very pretty. But just for today would be fine, wouldn't it? There are no more fight lessons for the day, and it's long past lunch.

"Like Liu Mingyan?" she asks, remembering how the older girl wore hers. Long and loose, but still tied back. Like a lazy ponytail, except she made it look so *pretty.*

Ning Yingying knows she's cute; everyone has always told her how cute she is, even Shizun- though not in so many words.

But she has never felt *pretty.*

"More loose than that," Shen Yuan says, "would it be easier if I showed you? And if A-Ying doesn't like it, I- I can try again."

Ning Yingying nods, hair slipping out of Shen Yuan's hands. He gathers it up again, and begins to work. It's nice. Ning Yingying has always liked it when people play with her hair. Chen Xiaoling is a little clumsy with it, but it's cute. Ming Fan never dared, none of the older boys dared. The older girls only did it sometimes. Whenever he has time, Shizun is very, very careful, but she has always liked it the most when it's Shizun. He used to always brush her hair when she was sad.

That's why she asked A-Luo to do it.

Shen Yuan is just as gentle as Shizun, but different too. Shizun always acted a little bit like Ning Yingying's hair was silk that could be torn if he pulled a little too hard. A-Luo just combed through it, over and over until Ning Yingying had caught her breath and stopped sobbing like a baby.

A-Yuan is gentle but decisive. It feels like he knows what he is doing, what he *wants.* As if there is an end to it, which there is, of course. He isn't doing her hair to comfort her. He is doing it as an apology.

Which maybe is a little bit of a comfort, too.

Not that he does. Apologize, that is. It's just quiet. Ning Yingying's eyes drift around the room. To Mo Liqin. Up to the corner where the odd spider always rests, a little creature she never paid attention to until Shen Yuan had begun to make notes of it, pointing out how *weird* it was. Does he still remember it? It's been a while since he brought it up.

So silent. Ugh.

"... A-Yuan was going to talk too?" she finally asks.

He stops moving. Then, slowly, he continues. The comb is set aside, and she feels as he begins to section hair. There is a ribbon brushing against Ning Yingying's neck, cool silk that makes her twitch. It tickles.

“Right. Yes. This one- yes,” Shen Yuan says, stumbling over his words, and Ning Yingying doesn’t want to smile, but she kind of does anyway. Silly A-Yuan. Silliest shidi-didi. “I’m… not upset with Shijie.”

“Don’t lie!”

“Fine! Fine, alright, *okay.* I was a little upset with A-Ying,” he says, “but I don’t- I don’t hate you. And this one shouldn’t have yelled at A-Ying.”

“Or A-Luo.”

“... or Binghe,” he agrees, voice soft and guilty, “I’m not… it’s stupid, but I don’t. I don’t *know* why I…” tug, tug as he threads ribbons through her hair. Sometimes he has to redo a part, fingers clumsy. Maybe that is why he doesn’t finish the sentence; too distracted by his own mistakes. She will help him.

“A-Luo said that A-Yuan is stressed.”

“He did?”

Well, maybe not *exactly* that. But Ning Yingying isn’t stupid.

And maybe… maybe she can see how A-Yuan could be stressed. Ning Yingying has had trouble sleeping too; a lot of them have. She has seen Ming Fan patrol when he shouldn’t, checking in on the dormitories. Much like Shizun, who only ever seems to sit down when he is doing boring paperwork. Poor little Chen Xiaoling has crawled into her bed many times because of nightmares.

“Yes,” Ning Yingying says, “and I’ve read lots and lots about what to do when you’re stressed. In one book, they said that when people go through a lot, they can get all emotional like A-Yuan,”

“Shijie-”

“And,” she continues, ignoring him, “what they *always* need is a true love’s kiss and maybe some sex–”

“A-Ying!” he yelps, dropping her hair. His voice gets so high pitched that he could be a girl, and Ning Yingying can’t help it. She giggles.

“What! I read it in a book,” she defends herself in between laughter, “doesn’t Shidi always say I should learn more from books?”

“Not a fictional one!” he complains, gathering her hair up again. When Ning Yingying sneaks a peek, she sees that his face is *bright* red. Redder than tomatoes and apples and wedding red. “Especially not such… such a… aren’t you too young for that!?”

“I’m sixteen! A whole year older than A-Yuan!” Ning Yingying protests, annoyance back, making her feel all- all *weird.* Hot and tight, like a badly strung guqin whose strings are about to snap, “Stop acting like I’m a baby! I’m not. Chen Xiaoling is the baby, not *me.”*

Silence, and Ning Yingying bites her lip again. Digs her nails into her legs, because she didn’t… this was supposed to be her Shidi apologizing, it’s supposed to be a nice moment where she gets pretty hair and doesn’t have to feel stupid and silly and *ugh* anymore.

But she isn’t a baby. She *isn’t.* A-Yuan should know that.

“... Shijie is right. She isn’t a baby,” Shen Yuan mumbles, “she can read anything she wants.”

Ning Yingying breathes out.

“Good,” she replies, “because they’re fun books. More fun than the boring ones that Shidi reads.”

“Shijie isn’t reading them where *others* can see, right?”

“Of course not! Then Ming-shixiong would take them away. I’m not stupid either, A-Yuan. I’m not a baby *or* stupid. Okay!”

“I’m…”

“Whatever,” she says, pretending she didn’t hear anything as she plays with Mo Liqin’s ribbons, pulling the sword into her lap, and stubbornly goes back to what she said before, “so anyway, A-Yuan is stressed, and you got mad because you have no one to kiss. But it was still really mean. So- so I’m glad that A-Yuan apologized, even if he hasn’t gotten a true love’s kiss. Or sex.”

He makes a strangled noise.

“I’m- I still haven’t said sorry,” Shen Yuan chokes out, “and I’m *not* going to go and kiss anyone! Or- or that!”

“Really?”

“Yes! What do you think I am!?”

“A boy? Boys kiss all the time.”

“We do *not!”*

“The books say you do. Lots of kissing.” She pauses. “Does that mean A-Luo does a lot of kissing as well? He *is* very cute! And he’s been outside a lot.”

“Shijie, please, I… wait until I’m finished with your hair,” Shen Yuan says, miserable. Silly. She can’t stay mad at him, not when he can’t even talk about kissing. Who is the real baby?

“Is Shidi saying A-Luo isn’t cute?” Ning Yingying asks, because has he *seen* A-Luo? Luo Binghe is the prettiest boy in the world, with thick eyelashes and pretty hair and a soft, sweet smile to match his soft, sweet voice. Ning Yingying has heard about *so* many girls having crushes on him. She tells Shen Yuan as much.

“Of course they do! It’s Binghe, who else are they going to crush on!?”

Liu Mingyan is right there, Ning Yingying doesn’t say. As is Shizun and Wei Qingwei and Qi Qingqi, but maybe Shen Yuan is too much of a baby to hear about how other disciples like to crush on *older* people. She has read about that in her books as well. They’re very good books.

“So A-Yuan agrees he is cute?” she says instead.

“Yes, fine, Binghe is cute,” Shen Yuan groans, “but don’t tell him that! Boys don’t like being cute. We like being handsome. And cool.”

“I want to be cool. And pretty. A-Yuan can keep the handsome part,” Ning Yingying says, “but he should go and kiss someone, so he is less mean. But it only really works if you have sex too–”

“I’m sorry!”

Oh.

Ning Yingying blinks. She hadn’t- she didn’t *actually* think he would…

“Really?” she asks.

“Yes!” Shen Yuan says, “Yes, I’m *sorry.* For not taking A-Ying seriously. For being mean, and- and… I don’t know, stupid.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” She smiles, feeling giddy. “I forgive A-Yuan.”

“Thank you,” he says with relief, “that’s- thank you. Um. Oh, uh, it’s done,” he says, “your hair.”

“Really!?”

“Yes. Shijie can go look in–” he begins, but Ning Yingying doesn’t let him finish. She squeals and jumps off the bed, Mo Liqin in hand as she runs over to the nearest bronze mirror, trying to see what he has done.

It’s- well, at first she thinks it’s a bit like Liu Mingyan’s hair. He tied it back, but tied it very low. Except- there are the ribbons, higher up? How…

“They’re called waterfall braids,” Shen Yuan says. He is flexing his fingers, rolling his wrist. Ning Yingying touches her hair, feels all the ribbons tied in between as he continues, “it’s

kind of like braiding a circle around the back of your head? And I used- I tried to make the ribbons go from orange on both sides, then to green in the middle. To match your sword, and also Qing Jing and… and I kind of… let them hang loose, but it looked *too* free, so I tied it up in a low ponytail as well and. It's. Is it alright? Does Shijie like it?"

She stares at her reflection. It's a little distorted by the mirror, the light is a little too dim in the dormitories. But as he explains, she can see what he is describing and- and she looks–

Ning Yingying eyes well up.

"I love it," she hiccups, and turns back to throw herself at him, to give him the bestest hug of all time, "thank you!"

Shen Yuan sits, stiff as a board, before he slowly hugs her back.

"Shijie is welcome," he says, and Ning Yingying giggles wetly as she pulls back, touching her hair again. She wants to run across the whole peak, to show everyone!

"A-Yuan should do the same to his own hair! I bet he would get so many kisses then!" she says, fingers fluttering over her hair, wanting to touch and play but scared to undo it all.

"I told Shijie, I'm not going to go and kiss anyone," he sighs.

"Not even A-Luo?"

"Why would you ask that!?"

"Because A-Luo is pretty," she points out, blinking at him, "and A-Yuan said it himself. Who wouldn't want to kiss him?"

"I'm a boy. I don't- even if- I mean, Binghe wouldn't… all the girls…"

"I want to kiss girls *and* boys. And A-Luo likes Shidi best, I'm sure he would kiss you lots if you asked! You can practice together! Lots of books mention that too. It's very important to practice *before* you meet someone!" She wrinkles her nose. "Some books say you have to wait, but that seems silly. How will you get good at kissing your true love if you never practice? What if you kiss them *wrong* at your wedding!"

"You're… you want to kiss both…?"

"Yeah? Doesn't everyone?"

Shen Yuan stares at her.

"A-Yuan?"

Shen Yuan stars and stares, eyes slowly widening. He gets very red, and then he gets very pale. Ning Yingying stares back, wondering if maybe she should be worried as her silly

Shidi-didi begins to look sick. Surely kissing can’t be that bad?

“Wedding,” he says, sounding faint. And then he stands up, swaying, before he stumbles towards the door like he is drunk. Which he isn’t, obviously. A-Yuan wouldn't be a drunk. Except then he walks into the door before he can get it open, and Ning Yingying jumps at the loud thud.

“A-Yuan!?”

Oh.

Oh *no.*

Shen Yuan, for the second time that day, runs.

Chapter End Notes

NYY, an enlightened bisexual: objectively, our teacher-dad is pretty hot
SY, repressed and gay: i can't hear you

also SY, one minute later: I NEED TO LEAVE

WOW!!! Well, first of all, did not think I would be able to upload on time today. Second of all, Ning Yingying refused to let go. In the end, I had to yield, and here we are. A whole chapter dedicated to the best girl <3

I had a nice holidays!!! I got enough books to make being bedridden tolerable, and now the weather has gotten a bit better so I actually got a massive boost of energy today. After I went to the trouble of telling people on tumblr that the update would be late? I'm a filthy liar who lies. At least I've finished reading "Project Hail Mary", so now I have two new blorbos to add to my collection. (Grace and Rocky, my darlings)

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Even if (or perhaps because?) NYY took control. Gosh I wonder why a wedding and gay kisses would make SY run off like that. So weird.

Thanks as always for all the support and love, and I hope we all get a great next year!

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan doesn't know where he is running.

He only knows that he must keep doing so until he gets *away.* Away from the dormitories and the beds placed in a line, away from Ning Yingying with her puffy eyes and waterfall braids. Away from the idea of Binghe and–

Shen Yuan runs into the tree, *their* tree, and for a moment he only clings to it, gasping for all the air he lost while running. The bark is rough against his skin, snow stuck between the gaps from where the wind blew it. His feet are cold as well. Shen Yuan was running through knee deep snow to get where he is, and some must have gotten inside his shoes. It's horrible and almost distracting enough to make him forget why he was running.

But only almost.

He tries to climb the tree, but his stupid hands are too numb, too fucked up to be of any use. The bark is too brittle in the cold, breaking off when pulled on too harshly, making him drop and fall. So Shen Yuan gives up with a frustrated half-choked scream, and he kicks it, before he thinks *fuck it.* Because he wants to get up in the fucking tree, damn it, and he thinks about all the ways qi can be used and he focuses all that burning bristling heat in his chest and he aims it *down.*

It's like he is Astro Boy; from his feet there's a harsh *push* and Shen Yuan has a split second to realize maybe pushing *all* of it to his feet was a mistake. And then up he goes with a shriek, flailing wildly before all the breath is knocked out of him upon landing on a thick branch, belly first.

Shen Yuan hangs over it like a noodle waiting to be cooked. He wheezes, limbs dangling, and stares blearily down at the ground far below.

And Binghe, who gapes up at him.

"Yuan?" his friend asks, and Shen Yuan can only groan in response, because *really?* How long has Binghe been there? Why did he have to see *that,* see- see Shen Yuan's horrible attempt at goddamn space flight? Fuck! Fuck!!!

And he didn't even stick the landing! He is just- dangling.

"Is Yuan hurt?" Binghe asks, pressing his hands against the tree trunk.

"Only my pride," Shen Yuan says, though he is uncertain of how much is audible. He can't breathe. He can't look, either, not at Binghe, and so he squeezes his eyes shut instead. Except– "Why is Binghe here?" Shen Yuan asks, forcing his eyes open once more.

“I was waiting outside when Yuan ran past,” his friend, his *best friend,* says, carefully feeling about as he begins to climb their tree, “and I followed. Did the talk go bad? Is that why Yuan ran?”

Yes. No. It went horribly. It was fine.

It was the worst thing he had ever experienced, because–

“A-Ying only wanted to talk about kissing,” he forces out, and startles when there’s a yelp and a thud. “Binghe! Are you alright?”

“Shijie wants to kiss Yuan!?” Binghe asks, laying on his back, sprawled in between the roots of the tree from where he fell.

“N-No?”

“Yuan wants to kiss Shijie!?”

“No! Of course not! Shijie wants to kiss everyone, I don’t want to kiss *anyone!”* he lies, like a liar, and immediately wants to bite his own tongue off because it’s *not* a lie, he doesn’t- he *can’t.* It can’t be a lie.

“Not even Zhu Kang?”

???

“Why the fuck would I want to kiss Zhu-shixiong?” he asks, incredulous, “Binghe, did you hit your head? Wait there, I’m coming down!”

Binghe, who had been trying to get back up, obediently sinks back down to the ground. Shen Yuan bites his lip as he very, very carefully makes his way down, trying to not make an idiot of himself. Again.

He mostly succeeds, except for the very end. That is when he slides down the last bit of the tree like the slowest fireman on a pole of all time, his clothes dragging awkwardly against the rough bark before his feet finally meet the ground. That is when he slips on a root and yelps as he falls.

Poor Binghe once more gets an elbow to the gut. How many times must a protagonist serve as a cushion for the unworthy? Too many.

“I’m so sorry,” Shen Yuan wheezes, crawling off of his friend. Luo Binghe lays in a daze, still sprawled across uneven roots and scuffed snow, “let- let me make sure you’re alright.”

A quick examination reveals that there are only bruises. No head injuries or broken bones, not even any sprained ankles or wrists. Binghe has merely had the misfortune of being landed upon twice in one day.

At least this time it was only Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan stares at the wrist in his hands. Binghe's qi is strong, all yang and easy to trace with how bright and warm it is.

It would be impossible to know that just by looking at the wrist; Shen Yuan's reddened fingertips against a blue vein, the slight bump of the ulnar styloid when Shen Yuan changes his grip. Because that is what it's called, that odd little bump by the wrist. Something everyone has, even the protagonist. Ulnar styloid. He could be holding anyone's wrist, right then. It would be easy to pretend. All Shen Yuan has to do is to not look up.

But it isn't just anyone's wrist. It's *Binghe's* wrist.

And he wants to kiss him.

"Binghe is fine," Shen Yuan says, letting go of his best friend's wrist, feeling numb and far away, feeling too *close* and *here,* "and before he asks, so am I."

"Is Yuan certain?" Binghe asks, in that tone of voice that says he *knows* that Shen Yuan is lying. It's not fair. If he knows that Shen Yuan is lying, then he might know *what* the lie is. And if he knows that–

"Yeah," Shen Yuan replies, hands numb, all pins and needles as he speaks, "I just- I just didn't want to talk about it anymore. The- the kissing. And Shijie wouldn't stop, and…" Shen Yuan clears his throat and looks away, heart beating like a stampede in his chest, "and I braided her hair. And promised to say sorry to Binghe as well."

"Sorry? I don't need that," his friend protests, sitting up with a wince.

"No, she's right," Shen Yuan says and forces himself to look at him. To meet his best friend's eyes, with those ridiculous eyelashes and he sees how the sun makes the dark irises shine like obsidian, and really, Ning Yingying is right. "Binghe didn't deserve being yelled at. I'm sorry."

Binghe *is* the prettiest boy around.

But why the fuck did Ning Yingying have to bring up *weddings!?*

Weeks ago, Shen Yuan had a dream about a wedding.

It was a stupid dream made by a demon, and he hasn't thought about it a single time since he had it. Except he thinks about it every night he lays down to sleep, wondering if this is the night Binghe will finally let him talk to Meng Mo, and if so, what if…?

Not that Shen Yuan *wanted* to dream about weddings or- or kissing. He only wants to be prepared, in case the elder demon decides to pull a prank. That's all.

But weeks have passed; Shen Yuan has had many dreams since, and none of them have been influenced by Meng Mo. There have been dreams that were like scenes straight out of the original. Glorious scenes of Luo Binghe defeating his enemies, marrying his wives and kissing them in that way only a stallion protagonist could.

They should be the only dreams. But they aren't.

Because there are dreams where Binghe leans in, so close that Shen Yuan can count his eyelashes. So close that it almost feels real, except it's not. Because he always wakes up before they- before–

It's like Shen Yuan's mind knows it's too impossible to even imagine.

A stallion protagonist, kissing a boy? Please.

So Shen Yuan doesn't have those dreams, not ever.

He refuses.

"Yuan has had a lot on his mind," Binghe says, oblivious to Shen Yuan's thoughts, "I already knew you didn't mean it, so it's fine. There is nothing to apologize for."

"I don't- it's not *that* much on my mind, Binghe is… is exaggerating."

"I'm really not," Binghe says, shaking his head. He catches Shen Yuan's hands, and Shen Yuan lets him warm them up between his own. Binghe's hands are as warm as gloves. Maybe warmer. "Yuan is doing a lot. For Shizun, for Zhangmen-shibo. For Shijie and Chen-shimei and… and for me. If Yuan needs to yell at someone to feel a little better, then it's fine. He can just yell at me. I can take it."

Shen Yuan closes his eyes.

"You shouldn't have to," he forces out, wondering if Binghe would still hold his hands if he *knew.* If Shen Yuan told him, right now- would they even return to sleep in the same room? Or would Binghe move back to the dormitories? Would he stay out of guilt? "And it's never a burden to do things for Binghe."

"Yuan is harboring a *demon-"*

“Half demon at *best,”* Shen Yuan scoffs, opening his eyes once more, “Meng Mo wasn’t sure, was he? How far back it goes? And it doesn’t matter, Binghe is *Binghe.”*

“But…”

“No buts! If Binghe insists it’s fine that I don’t apologize, then Binghe must also be fine with this. We agreed, didn’t we? Binghe is Binghe.”

And his friend smiles at him, helpless and fond, and Shen Yuan’s heart clenches and his hands feel too warm, safely tucked in between Binghe’s palms.

“Fine,” Binghe agrees, “so what does Yuan want to do, right now?”

To not talk about kissing. To not even think about it.

“Maybe we can go to the library,” Shen Yuan suggests, feeling half-hysterical, holding hands like this, “and do more research?”

It feels like a cop-out. It feels like a cowardly thing to do, except it’s not. They do need to research. They *do* need to learn as much as they can, just in case they never find that damn fish necklace. They don’t know when Shen Yuan will get Fu Yue back, when he will be allowed outside to help track it down. So it’s fine. Hitting up the library is *sensible.*

And besides, what else is he going to do?

Think about *it?*

He is very good at not doing that. So he isn’t going to.

“Library it is,” Binghe agrees, and helps him stand up.

It is a day of interruptions.

Liu Qingge marches down the stairs, looking suspiciously well-kept for a man who just visited someone he hated. There is not a lock of hair out of place, not so much of a wrinkle in his robes. It is almost like he didn’t fight; as if the apology he had issued to Shen Qingqiu had *actually* done as intended instead of, say, causing massive destruction.

Shen Yuan doesn’t trust it.

There is a mad urge to grab Binghe and jump behind a nearby rock, to hide before Liu Qingge sees them. Which is ridiculous- there is no reason to hide. Especially when the stairs are long and Liu Qingge must have seen them before they ever saw him, as he is going down and they are going up.

And why would that matter, anyway? It is not like Liu Qingge will do anything to them. He will just pass by, go on with his day and let Shen Yuan and Binghe go to the library in peace. He will not stop to look at them and then use his superior peak lord powers to figure out everything they could ever hide.

Except as Shen Yuan and Binghe step aside to show respect, bowing their heads the way one is supposed to, Liu Qingge stops.

In front of them.

holyshitfuckheknows–

"You," he says, and Shen Yuan looks up.

"Yes, Shishu?" he asks as Liu Qingge stares them both down. Standing two steps higher, he towers over them like a looming tower of doom. Shen Yuan *knows* he can't read minds. That's, like, a demon skill. A rare one. That Binghe will kill in suitably gorey fashion in the future.

He still tries very hard to not think about anything incriminating.

Which of course means he is thinking about nothing but exactly that.

"Mu Qingfang said you taught Lin Jie how to read."

Huh? What? Why is he bringing *that* up?

"Well- we were still learning," Shen Yuan says, exchanging a glance with Binghe, who looks as confused as he feels, "but this one was working on it, Shishu." And then, because Shen Yuan doesn't know when to shut up, he asks, "how is Lin-shidi? This one has not seen him since the- since Shishu, ah, took him away. If he still needs lessons–"

"We have teachers," Liu Qingge cuts him off.

"You do?" Shen Yuan says.

A moment of silence as he processes what he just let slip. There's a *ping!* as he is rewarded ten F-points.

"That is a logical question," Shen Qingqiu says as he appears out of seemingly nowhere, fan unfolded and green eyes lit with evil amusement, "this master has certainly never met one of Bai Zhan's… *teachers."*

"We have them," Liu Qingge insists, straightening up to glower at Shen Qingqiu, "there is no need for your- for-" he scowls, then huffs, "for disciple Shen to continue the lessons. You will

tell Lin Jie this," he tells Shen Yuan, as if Shen Yuan could even leave the peak to do so.

"Is Lin-shidi causing difficulties for Shishu?" Binghe asks, pleasant and polite enough that an outsider would be fooled. He is, however, using the same tone he uses when speaking to Ming Fan and Shen Qingqiu, so Shen Yuan is *not* fooled. "

Neither is Shen Qingqiu; the man looks like he is considering whether he should punish or mercifully let it slide, as the faux politeness is aimed at someone else this one time.

"The boy is stubborn," Liu Qingge says, which is *yes.*

Oh fuck, did Lin Jie bite Liu Qingge? Did he bite the war god???

"Shixiong never had trouble teaching Lin-shidi anything," Binghe says, as if he hadn't seen Lin Jie bite three people in a row. As if he and Ning Yingying hadn't been vocally against teaching the child. Shen Yuan clears his throat.

"This one enjoyed teaching Lin-shidi. Perhaps I could continue…?"

"You will not," Shen Qingqiu says, "if Bai Zhan Peak cannot teach their own disciples such a simple thing as *reading,* then it only proves they are little more than beasts themselves."

Liu Qingge whirls around to glare at Shen Qingqiu.

Hm, Shen Yuan thinks, *maybe the massive destruction will begin now.*

He should be more worried about that. But Binghe's fingers wrap around his wrist, and Shen Yuan feels nothing but the warmth of it, the way the tip of Binghe's fingers slip under his gloves, touching the cradle of his palm.

Shen Yuan's heart beats too loudly.

Binghe tugs him away as Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu act like territorial cats, hissing and bitching, the details of their words lost among the drumming within Shen Yuan's chest.

Even by the time they sit down in the library, books and scrolls open around them, Shen Yuan's wrist tingles where Binghe held him.

He can't stop thinking about it.

It's like Ning Yingying's words cracked his head open, as if she was a squirrel and his skull was a walnut that she just *had* to break. And then, as squirrels do, she left him with the remains and now he can't stop *thinking about it.*

Shen Yuan feels like he is going insane.

He can't sleep, which makes him tired. Being tired makes him grouchy. Half the time he just wants to hide his face against Binghe's back as his friend reads or cooks, to use his friend's reliable, supportive back to shut out the world. And then he remembers *why* he haven't slept lately and suddenly Shen Yuan is sitting as far away as he can without being *weird,* pretending his face isn't on fire because why the *fuck* is he so touchy??? So- so clingy!

But being clingy is apparently a habit; one that Shen Yuan keeps falling back on, except now it's not- it's not *right.*

Only, Binghe is clingy as well. They are always touching each other. Bumping shoulders, linking their arms together, smoothing out stray hairs, using the other's lap as a pillow or as a footrest and so many more casual little things that he never paid attention to before, and it's.

It's too much. So Shen Yuan is going insane, and he needs to talk to someone before he fucking *explodes.*

But who would he talk to?

Who would *understand* this bullshit situation he has stepped into? What can he even say? He can't tell Ning Yingying, because she will just tell Binghe. Or, worse, *everyone else.* Shen Qingqiu would murder him for having emotions, something tells him Yue Qingyuan would be really weird about it. He can't go and tell *Mu Qingfang* that he is- is gay. Because he isn't.

The only one he wants to kiss is Binghe.

And like Ning Yingying said, who doesn't want to kiss him?

It's *Binghe.*

But no one except him understands what that means. Except-

Except for one other person.

The rainbow bridge isn't fully repaired. But it's enough that even he can make the jump between platforms, if he channels his qi just right. Shen Yuan could do it. He could leave the peak, go to An Ding, go and yell at someone who would understand why this is impossible and awful. It would be easy, and might not even take that long.

But he made a deal with Shen Qingqiu. Breaking it could mean he won't be allowed to ever leave again. That he won't get Fu Yue back, and if he can't leave or even have his spirit sword, then how could he be of help? Would he just be cast aside, the plot moving ahead of him, leaving Shen Yuan as the awkward side character that is just too weak to accompany the protagonist? A fun little easter egg in the finale, never thought about inbetween?

He always hated those kinds of characters. Useless things, there to pad a story enough to move on, friendships abandoned because the author got bored and decided to focus on nothing else but power-ups and shitty fan service. Half the time it was the childhood love interest, and sometimes it was just the generic friends from some humble village. Characters that are too boring to keep up, but important for the barely-there emotional growth at the start.

Except this is even worse. If this was a story, if there were fucking- panels, cut to him, zeroed in on certain moments where he–

People would *know.*

Shen Yuan clutches at his head, until the feeling of nails against his scalp makes him stop. There's a pounding behind his eyes, a vicious headache that grows worse for each sleepless night.

He hates this.

Binghe's hair is soft.

Shen Yuan combs his fingers through it, sectioning it off for braids. Binghe's hair is thick and glossy. Is it because he is the protagonist, or is it because *Proud Immortal Demon Way* just happens to have a version of modern shampoo? A combination of both?

"If we were to replace this line with this curve instead," Binghe says, dragging his finger along the hanzi, "and use my blood instead of cinnabar, then I think it would strengthen the seal."

"I don't think it's the strength of the seal that's the problem," Shen Yuan replies, gathering Binghe's hair into one hand, sees the soft, short curls by his nape before he hurriedly looks back to the braids he is making, fingers moving swiftly as he wraps them over and over each other, "it's meant to paralyze demons, isn't it? Specifically fire ones. We don't know if that is helpful."

"Meng Mo said that there could be a loss of control when- when the seal breaks. That I could attack those nearby. I just.."

"If Binghe goes a little bit rabid, I'll climb the closest tree and wait until you've calmed down," Shen Yuan reasons, "I'm not going to put a binding seal on you if there's other people around. They will have swords. You know, the pointy things that kills you?"

“Yuan, I can climb trees *now.* How would climbing one be safe for you if I succumb to demonic instincts?”

“I bet it’s not as easy to climb one if I’m throwing shit at you.”

There is a pause.

“Hopefully not literal shit,” Binghe then says, and one doesn’t need to see his face to hear him smirking.

Shen Yuan pinches him, right at the spot he hadn’t been staring at. Binghe yelps, and the skin turns a blushing red. It looks painful. He didn’t mean to pinch so hard.

Shen Yuan smooths his hand over it, qi soothing it before it can bruise. It’s better, anyway, than doing something silly like kissing it better. This actually helps.

“Sorry,” he says, half-genuine, “and where would I even get actual shit from? I refuse to do latrine duty just to throw it at you if you happen to go a little bit feral. Don’t be gross.”

“Didn’t Yuan ask for samples from Heng-shixiong last time he went down to the stables…?”

“I didn’t ask for samples from the horses! Or their shit! I just- shut up!” and the braids come undone before he can tie them off, because what can he do but try and tickle Binghe into apologizing? What can he do, but laugh and fend off Binghe when his best friend tries to return the favor?

What can he do?

Winter was a lengthy affair on Cang Qiong Mountain.

It always lingered just a bit too long, the tip of each peak painted white all the way into spring. But when spring did arrive, it came quickly. Less than a week after Ning Yingying’s nut cracking behavior, less than a week into Shen Yuan’s *issue,* the creeks that had been

frozen began to run once more, the water cold enough to make one's fingers numb if they were to touch it.

It was Shen Yuan's favorite thing; watching the snow melt, tufts of grass springing up in between lingering snow drifts like they had just been hiding all along.

Or it *was* his favorite thing, for about two minutes. That is usually how long it would take him to leave the house and find the nearest patch of mud and slushy snow, and less than that for Shen Yuan to slip and fall on his face.

If one were to ignore the death trap which was slippery hills and Shen Yuan's stupid fucking feet, it was going pretty well. His hands were almost fully mobile, his qi control was improving and the tension which had been lingering within the sect since the invasion had, at last, slowly but surely begun to relax, like flowers blossoming open for spring.

Shen Yuan watches as Shen Qingqiu and Ming Fan bids farewell to the little ones from Qiong Ding Peak, their last day on Qing Jing Peak.

They are all gathered to give them a proper goodbye. Chen Xiaoling is clutching at Shen Qingqiu's sleeve, waving the most of them all to the other children. On Shen Qingqiu's other side, Ming Fan's face is doing something *very* weird.

"Is da-shixiong trying not to cry?" he whispers to Binghe.

"That or he ate something sour," Binghe whispers back, and they watch as Ming Fan fusses over the little penguins, as if there aren't master cultivators in black and white *right there.* As if they are in any danger at all, cheerfully being picked up by those cultivators when they are done giving clumsy, childish half-bows to an indifferent Shen Qingqiu who offers a barely there nod in return.

Well, Ming Fan and Heng He *have* been the ones to take care of the kids the most. Seeing how fussy Ming Fan normally is, maybe it shouldn't be a surprise to see him act like a mother sending her kids off to boarding school.

"It's not like he can't go and visit them," Shen Yuan mutters, eyes drifting to the sword by Ming Fan's hip, "Ming-shixiong can fly there no problem."

"Is Shizun going to give A-Yuan's sword back soon?" Ning Yingying asks, fiddling with the pommel of her Mo Liqin.

"This one can hope," Shen Yuan replies, hopelessly.

As much progress as he has done with his hands, Shen Qingqiu has shown little sign of doing anything of the sort. Even now, Fu Yue hangs by his waist. The black handle glimmers in the sunlight, the sword tassel which Binghe made for it swaying in the cold wind.

Would Shen Qingqiu throw it away, if he found out Binghe made it? If he were to find out Binghe spent so much time finding the perfect stone, the effort that went into smoothing it

out and threading each thread through the hole in the middle of it? Would Shen Qingqiu throw it out like trash?

Surely not.

No, he wouldn't.

But what would Shen Qingqiu do, if he found out about what Shen Yuan wants to do? If he found out what- even if Shen Yuan would *never*–

Shen Yuan tucks his hands into his sleeves and focuses on his breathing. He can't think about it. He can't.

Ning Yingying is right there.

Leaning in to whisper into Binghe's ear, and Shen Yuan watches as Binghe's lips curve upwards into a smile. The way they stand, it's hard to not notice that Ning Yingying is growing up. She has to press against Binghe to reach his ear; her chest is noticeably touching his arm, and as any normal boy, Binghe doesn't move away. Who would? Even if it's Ning Yingying, she is- well, she is cute and growing into her body.

The perfect future wife.

He must go to An Ding Peak.

There is a familiar *click!* from Shang Qinghua's window, followed by the sound of someone climbing inside. He grins to himself, hidden behind the hand that he's resting his cheek against.

"Well, well, look who decided to drop in," Shang Qinghua says, turning towards it, "did Shen Qingqiu finally- *woah!* Bro, what happened!?"

Shen Yuan stands by the window.

The once pristine green and white robes of a Qing Jing disciple is now smeared with mud, brown streaks just fucking *destroying* any dignity the little guy could ever have. Shang Qinghua can't decide if it looks like Cucumber-bro had the worst diarrhea of all time or if he tried to take a swim in a chocolate fountain. Maybe both. Which would, uh, also lead to food poisoning and vomit and–

“Bro, you’re dripping,” Shang Qinghua says, because he is. Dirty water and thick drops of slimy mud. It’s all forming puddles of *nasty* on his scuffed floors, ugh, does *he* have to clean it? Can he call some lowlife in to deal with it, or is the kid there in secret? “You want a towel?”

“Airplane,” Peerless Cucumber says.

Shang Qinghua looks at his face, and has immediate regrets.

“Airplane,” Shen Yuan says again, voice thick, “Binghe is going to have *so* many wives.”

And then he bursts into tears.

Chapter End Notes

NYY: *has her sword*
SY: I'm not jealous
NYY: *has boobs*
SY: I'M NOT JEALOUS

This chapter is a bit shorter than normal, despite the long wait. I apologize but I hope you guys enjoyed SY having a bad time :D
I wish I could promise my uploading schedule would become less rocky from now on, but most likely I'll still struggle for a bit. But I'm still having fun writing, so don't worry! I just need many breaks to rest these days <3

anyway as a fellow big boob haver, NYY did nothing wrong. I stand with NYY's big boobs.

Raindeathlily has been SPOILING me! Behold, fanart!
This one has early YQY and SY , and this one has the original bully trio!

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan is an ugly crier.

The little guy's eyes are nearly swollen shut by the time his sobbing turns into sniffles. His chin looks like a dried prune. There is snot. There are tear tracks down dirty cheeks, and Shang Qinghua never signed up for this. Fuck, even *before* he died, he didn't have to deal with this. No snotty kid tears! Only his own! He preferred that, thanks! Like any self-respecting adult, he stayed home and sobbed into instant ramen and ice cream and had sad, sad masturbation sessions to men he could never land. He did *not* do whatever this was!

"Bro," he says with a grimace, wiping Shen Yuan's clean with a wet handkerchief, holding the boy's chin to keep him still, "how did you even get here? The bridge isn't even fixed yet, and I don't see a sword on you."

"I jumped," Cucumber-bro sniffles, clenching at his pants. They make a gross *squelch* sound. Should he offer some clean clothes? Would they even *fit?* Shen Yuan's legs are fucking stork legs, he might show some ankle if he wears Shang Qinghua's pants. What next, send him out naked? Yikes.

"What the fuck do you mean you *jumped?* Bro!"

"What? Like it's hard."

"Okay, Legally Blonde. Not that hard, you say, but who is here covered in sewage and crying about Bingge's harem?"

Shen Yuan's face screws up again.

"It's not sewage! I slipped on *your* stupid peak," he says, voice breaking, "and- and Binghe–"

He starts crying again.

Shang Qinghua scrubs at his face harder, hoping that will shut it up. It just makes Cucumber-bro cry even harder and makes his skin a bright red from it, and Shang Qinghua feels like he is about to lose it.

"Bro, it's fine! Look, I know, I get it, you won't get a wife of your own because your bff will have all of them. But it's fine! I heard eunuchs earn so much in this era, just chop it off! It's not like you're gonna use it, right? Better than this crying!" he says, hysterical, "so stop crying! Be a man!"

"Noooo!" Shen Yuan wails, swatting his hands away, "I don't wanna chop it off! And I don't want wives! I want- I want-!"

“What? You want what! *Tell me!”*

“A-Ying,” Shen Yuan sobs harder than ever, and then the ungrateful bastard wipes at his face with his still-dirty hands, undoing all of Shang Qinghua’s hard work.

Wait.

A-Ying? As in Ning Yingying?

What??? What!!!

“You can’t have her! That’s like, the emotional growth wife! *No!”* Shang Qinghua smacks him over the head with the handkerchief, and then shrieks as he leaps away from grubby, mud covered hands that try to slap him back, “Don’t touch me!”

“Then don’t hit me! And I don’t want *her!* She just- she said- A-Ying said she likes boys *and* g-girls, and then I just- she…” Shen Yuan’s words devolve into hiccuped mumbles. Shang Qinghua groans.

“Of course she does! She’s a wife, duh.”

Shen Yuan stares at him.

“Duh? What the fuck does that mean?” he asks, apparently so incredulous he can’t cry anymore. Shang Qinghua takes it as a win.

“Cucumber-bro,” Shang Qinghua says, crossing his arms, “did you forget *all* of your hate comments? A wife of Bingge’s gotta be bi, how else will she survive the orgies? Sure, Ning Yingying was rarely in those because of the whole pure childhood friend trope. But *woah,* when she was? People paid *so* much to read about her slurping cock while getting absolutely finger blasted by–”

“STOP!” Shen Yuan screams, grabbing a pillow and throwing it at Shang Qinghua who very bravely takes it to the face, “shut up, that’s my Shijie! I do *not* want to hear it! THAT’S NOT EVEN THE PROBLEM! THE PROBLEM IS THAT I’M *GAY!”*

Shang Qinghua feels like his brain is a gong and someone just hit it with the power of unbridled insanity. He stares at Shen Yuan, who has leapt to his feet. The boy is gasping, face bright red and still dripping mud all over the floor and what. What? Huh? Peerless Cucumber is…?

“What?” he says aloud.

The boy stares at him, then flinches. Shang Qinghua watches as Shen Yuan goes pale as paper, then red as tomatoes, and then ends up with a suspiciously green tinge that makes him want to reach for a bucket.

“W-Well, not, I’m not *gay,”* Shen Yuan stutters, eyes flicking around the room, looking anywhere else but at Shang Qinghua, “I just- I like Binghe. A lot?”

“Bro,” Shang Qinghua says, trying to compute, “you’re *gay?”*

“I’m not *gay*- gay, I just- it’s *Binghe,* of course I would-”

“Me too!”

“I’m not gay! I’m- WHAT.” Shen Yuan’s face snaps back to him, “you’re *gay!?”* ’

“Yeah!”

“You can’t be gay! You wrote- wrote so much porn! With- with- *with flowers, not pillars!”*

“I’m *so* gay, Cucumber-bro.”

Shen Yuan isn’t listening; he stares into some invisible camera, or maybe the void, as if expecting this to be a prank. That or maybe he just looks haunted. As if he didn’t read the fucking porn himself! As if he didn’t pay to–

“Wait, is that why the sex scenes *sucked?* Because you never touched a girl? I knew it!”

“Hey! I fucked a girl!” Shang Qinghua protests, and it’s not even a lie. He did *some* experimenting, alright! He fucked like. Two whole girls. It sucked, but he did it! He’s not a total virgin! “I fucked two girls! It was enough for me to know for *sure* I want cock, not pussy! Besides, the second one took it up the ass anyway so it was *basically* gay!”

“Shut up, you’re so gross,” Shen Yuan says, and hides his face with his grubby, grubby paws. Shang Qinghua really should get him fully cleaned up. Possibly kicked out, before Shen Qingqiu realizes he’s missing.

But also.

“I can’t, my tiny bro just told me that he’s gay for the straight protagonist. Sucks, bro.”

“I’m *not* tiny. I’m almost as tall as you,” Shen Yuan mutters. Drops his hands to look at Shang Qinghua, calculating. “Maybe taller.”

Shang Qinghua decides to sit down before Cucumber-bro can stand up to check. He doesn’t need to know, alright? He’s the *shishu* here. The cool, fun uncle-cousin-transmigrator-god. Whatever. Point is, he isn’t going to let Cucumber-bro get the better of him!

Turns out he didn’t have to worry.

As Shang Qinghua watches, Shen Yuan’s shoulders slump. His face does not screw up, but it does not relax, either. There is an odd tension over his face; like when one fills a glass with water, so much that it should spill but the tension never breaks.

It’s uncomfortable to look at. Shang Qinghua wants to poke a hole in it, let the water spill forth and make a mess.

“... there’s more fish in the sea,” Shang Qinghua says. “It doesn’t have to be Luo Binghe. Plenty of guys to choose from! Don’t go for the golden koi, dude, settle on a salmon or something. Kois turn into dragons and uh- yeah. There’s more guys to choose from.”

“I told you I’m not gay,” Shen Yuan mumbles back, sounding utterly defeated, “it’s just Binghe. Just him.”

That sounds *worse.*

Obviously it’s doomed. Shang Qinghua knows that Cucumber-bro has cozied up to the protagonist, sure. He has heard enough from his sect siblings and NPCs to know that they are close, not to speak of what the lil’ guy has told him all by himself. They are besties, bros, *maybe* even bros before hoes, if super lucky.

But Luo Binghe *is* the protagonist. He will have a harem of wives and many more lovers, and there is not a single dick in that sea of pussy.

“Better than being straight,” Shang Qinghua says, peering into a teacup, finding only a drop of tea in it, “then you would be competition, and obviously you would lose. Your life. Y’know, if lucky. So being gay- or solo-gay, I don’t know what you call it, is way better in this world! There’s totally a chance of not dying. Hey, is it a secret that you’re here, or can I send for more tea?”

Silence.

Shang Qinghua does not want to look at Shen Yuan. What if he is crying again? What if he still sits there, all sad and lumpy like a sad sack of potatoes? What then? Shang Qinghua would rather deal with Mobei-Jun having a temper tantrum. At least then he knows to duck and grovel!

This is just… uncomfortable.

But the silence drags on, and he has no choice but to look at Shen Yuan. The boy is still on the couch, still covered in mud. Staring into nothing, eyes wide with horror.

“Cucumber-bro?” he tries, tapping his fingers against the desk, “you alright there?”

“Airplane,” Shen Yuan slowly says, “what normally happens? To the gay best friend?”

“The one in love with the protagonist? They always–”

Shang Qinghua stops.

“Oh, bro,” he says.

“I’m doomed,” Shen Yuan agrees, and hides his face behind his hands.

Fuck it.

Shang Qinghua sends for tea.

Shen Yuan lies on the floor.

Well, it's not exactly the floor. There is a rug, or carpet, whichever term one may use. It is soft and nice and just a little bit worn, and as long as he doesn't smell it too hard he can ignore the musty floor smell that all carpets inevitably gain. It's honestly pretty fancy. Fancier than a hack author deserves, and Shen Yuan traces the patterns. He can't really see what it's depicting from this angle, but at least it's nice to touch. Tracing it while listening to the click-click sounds of Shang Qinghua using an abacus lets his mind drift.

He's going to die.

Because that is what happens to friends who go and get a stupid crush on their best friend who is also the protagonist. Maybe if he had been a girl, then *maybe* he would have had a near-death experience that would make Binghe realize he's in love, and then wham-bam, papapa time to–

He can't think about that.

Shen Yuan presses his entire face against the carpet, feeling like his head is about to boil. It's stupid. It's so *stupid.*

It's not like that would ever happen to him. Because he's not a girl, and he doesn't want to be one, either. His hope was to become a useful sidekick, and even that has been a struggle. Shen Yuan *still* doesn't know if he will be able to be anything more than the childhood friend stuck at home. Fuck, he likely won't be, once Shen Qingqiu realizes he snuck out. The bastard will only spend so much time down in the village, looking for- whatever he was looking for. Shen Yuan hadn't asked. But he should be back soon, and then he will find out and then he will lock up Shen Yuan forever.

… taking on the role of the useless friend stuck at home would let him live.

Should he just embrace that? It would be safer. The risk of dying in Binghe's arms, choking out a lame, cliché confession before he spits up blood and dies is- well. It's pretty fucking high. And then his death would be swept away, smoothed over as Binghe goes and gets comforted by his harem of wives, probably before Shen Yuan's corpse is even cold.

No, that's unfair. Binghe wouldn't. Not *his* Binghe.

His Binghe would grieve.

Shen Yuan groans.

“Maybe there’s an anti-love potion in the shop,” Airplane says, as if he is making any sense at all.

Shen Yuan flops onto his back, very much *not* looking down at his borrowed An Ding uniform. He thought maybe there would be some of Qing Jing in stock, but he forgot it’s not An Ding Peak who is in charge of clothes. Not like he would have gotten into Xian Shu Peak anyway. Or, well, he *could.* Guys were allowed to visit if they weren’t being perverts, but- whatever. At least he is clean now. Just in the wrong colors.

“What,” he says, “are you talking about?”

“Y’know, the store? Like the System sucks, but at least we can spend our points. Surely there’s like, anti-love potion shit in there. I once bought caramel popcorn. Wasn’t even a waste!”

“I know about the store,” Shen Yuan says, grinding his palms against his eyes until they burn, “where do you think I bought my memories from? But- caramel popcorn? Really?”

“What, you like them plain? Knew you were boring, no one complains that much about kinky porn if they aren’t boring.”

“You didn’t write kinky! You wrote *war crimes!* That slime princess was- ugh!”

“Bro, not even the ghost wife? You’re upset about the slime girl? She’s so tame! I’ve written so much freaky shit! The ghost wife even had missing parts!”

“The one with the *ribs!?* No! Somehow, the green jello slime girl was worse and you know why!”

“Whatever! Point is, use your points to cure yourself!”

Shen Yuan grimaces.

It’s not actually a… *bad* idea. It just leaves a foul taste in his mouth, to consider it. Shen Yuan always hated the story lines that involved love potions. Mind control? Fun! But love potions? It was just roofies in a xianxia setting, and *Proud Immortal Demon Way* had so many other options for shitty papapa. Was an anti-love potion really that much different? How would it affect him? Would it remove *all* affection? Wouldn’t that just blacken Binghe at record speed, if Shen Yuan went from being his best friend to… to hating him?

It wouldn’t make any sense. Binghe trusted him with his demonic lineage. Shen Yuan has hugged him and- and fucking *cried* in front of him. Mu Qingfang and Shen Qingqiu both claimed they were codependent, even now. Even though they slept in different beds.

Doing a heel-face turn would make no sense.

It certainly wouldn’t improve the plot.

How would it even work? Shen Yuan pictures Binghe’s dark eyes, the way his friend is always so *gentle,* massaging his hands. The way Binghe smiles at him, one canine a little

sharper than is normal, and he remembers how just watching Binghe pour tea makes his chest hurt. He tries to imagine never wanting to braid Binghe's hair again, and can't.

How could a potion ever hope to erase all of that?

"I doubt I have enough points for it," Shen Yuan says, which isn't even a lie. "I barely had any when I got here, and my F-points are only worth half as much as B-points." And if B stood for *Badass,* well. Obviously he didn't have many of those. No, most of his points had been consumed even before he reached the sect. For memories, for- for things. For the compass that had led him to the Cang Qiong Mountain. He had earned a lot of F-points, but…

"Big spender," Airplane says.

"You *just* told me you bought popcorn."

"Once! And I was going through it, I deserved a treat!"

"I–

Shang Qinghua waves him off, and Shen Yuan considers sitting up just so he can strangle him. Instead, Shang Qinghua looks towards the door. His head is tilted, like a dog trying to hear better. Shen Yuan wonders how far an Immortal can hear- and it's still cursed, that Airplane is considered an Immortal.

Except then a paper bird flies inside, unfolding itself into Shang Qinghua's hands. It's a fancy trick, something he rarely gets to see.

"... did Shizun find out?" Shen Yuan asks, sitting up to eye the door, before he forces himself to his feet.

Airplane shudders.

"I hope not! No, while you were washing up, this smart Shishu of yours sent for someone else to take the blame. Shen Qingqiu can kill me, but there's no way he can kill Wei Qingwei!"

Shen Yuan, who had tried to look at the letter, to see *how* one could make letters fly, stares.

"You called for *Wei Qingwei!?"*

Shang Qinghua grins, smug like a sleazy car salesman.

"Bro is fucking the sect healer. He is unkillable, and I bet I can make him take *all* the blame for you leaving! No one will ever know you went here by yourself. It's win-win. He will probably drag you around a bunch as well. Give you a nice break from," Shang Qinghua gestures at Shen Yuans' everything, the paper in his hand bobbing with the gesture, "being gay."

"I'm not *gay."*

“And I haven’t thought about my king’s rock hard nipples since before I died. Winks.”

“You- *he beats you.* And you just- you think about-?” Shen Yuan stops. He takes a deep breath. He remembers that the man before him is unhinged. Takes a moment to think about his words. “I hate you.”

“Nah, bro, we established a whole year ago that you admire me and want my opinion,” Airplane cheerfully replies, “remember when you first got Fu Yue? So tiny and cute, dude. Stop growing.”

“It’s not my fault that you’re short. It’s to pay for your sins,” Shen Yuan replies, snatching the letter out of Airplane’s hands, “how does this work? Can I make one?”

“You have Mary Sue genes, you filthy cheater. And uh. I don’t know if I should teach you.”

“Why *not?* I’m more responsible than you are!”

“Hey!”

Wei Qingwei arrives with a bright smile.

The bright smile immediately falls upon seeing Shen Yuan, and in turn, Shen Yuan’s heart freezes in horror. Why would the sight of him make Wei Qingwei *not* smile? Has that ever happened? He swears he has only ever seen Wei Qingwei’s dimples on full display, to the point that Shen Yuan can’t ever recall the man frowning. Did he do something? Did Airplane not tell him why he was being called over? Did- did *Mu Qingfang* say something?

Should he pour him tea? Would that help–

“I can’t believe that my Xiao-Shen is wearing *An Ding* colors!”

What?

Shen Yuan falters from where he sits by the desk, in the middle of trying to fold a bird out of paper. He blinks at the Wan Jian peak lord. Wei Qingwei is clutching at his chest like he has been stabbed.

“Haha,” Airplane says, possibly holding back a ‘fuck you too’, “well, it’s not like disciple Shen could wear Qing Jing! They were dirty. And this one thinks that he looks very nice in them.”

“This one greets Shishu,” Shen Yuan hurries to say, his heart still catching up from the scare. He gets up and offers a bow, feeling awkward and stiff.

“Oh, we are past such greetings,” Wei Qingwei replies, and Shen Yuan yelps as he is yanked forwards, right into–

A chest.

He stands there, arms awkwardly held out, Wei Qingwei’s arms wrapped around him. This close, it is impossible to miss the familiar scent of sword oil. Cloves, he thinks the man once told him. Cloves, and the scent that brings to mind of the house which he has spent nearly a year in.

Shen Yuan’s eyes sting, and he hugs back.

Wei Qingwei’s hand is warm as it rubs his back. It is a solid weight, calm and reassuring, and Shen Yuan abruptly feels like a small child again. The thought makes his cheeks burn, and he presses his face harder against the man’s chest to hide it.

“We must go to Wan Jian Peak,” Wei Qingwei says, “for if Xiao-Shen is to wear another peak’s colors, he must wear this uncle’s. Ah, perhaps we can visit A-Fang as well! Surely he would like to see Xiao-Shen in the colors of Qian Cao Peak, hm?”

“Does Shixiong *want* Shen-shixiong to kill him?” Shang Qinghua asks, incredulous, “he may let some… ah, *borrowing* slip for now, but to dress disciple Shen up in other colors…”

“Oh, it will be fine. A-Fang needs some cheering up, and a visit from Xiao-Shen will do wonders. Don’t you agree?” Wei Qingwei asks, and Shen Yuan reluctantly leans back to look him in the face.

“Isn’t Mu-shishu busy?” he asks, except his voice cracks and Shen Yuan wants to *die.* His mortification must be clear as day, for Wei Qingwei’s smile widens into a grin.

“Not so busy to deny a visit,” he says, voice full of mischief. It somehow reminds Shen Yuan of when Binghe convinced him to visit Yue Qingyuan, when his friend dragged him past the long lines of visitors, confident that they would be let through.

Shen Yuan steps away, feeling oddly fluttery, and looks towards Shang Qinghua.

Airplane looks back, judging, before he turns back towards the Wan Jian Peak Lord. If they were alone, Shen Yuan would throw a book at him. Now he can only stand there, blushing furiously, not sure exactly *what* the hack-author had judged him for, but knowing he hates it.

Wei Qingwei and Airplane spare a moment to discuss the plan, Airplane convincing the other man to shoulder any blame that may come. It does not take long before Wei Qingwei gestures for Shen Yuan to follow.

And yet, he hesitates.

He looks back to Shang Qinghua.

“What?” Shang Qinghua asks, rolling out a scroll, “shoo, before your esteemed Shizun finds out where you’ve been.”

True. Time is running out; the man must be on his way back to Qing Jing Peak. Ning Yingying and Binghe both may have gone looking for Shen Yuan, because these past days have been a haze and he thinks they noticed. It took a lot of planning to sneak away from them.

But.

“May this one inspect Shang-shishu’s meridians?” he blurts out, and Airplane drops the brush he had just picked up. Staring at him like Shen Yuan is the crazy one.

“Why?” the guy asks, flabbergasted.

Shen Yuan swallows and tugs the sleeves over his hands, too aware of Wei Qingwei standing by the door, listening.

“Um,” Shen Yuan says, “because that’s what I always do?”

Airplane stares at him. He looks bewildered and confused, flabbergasted and incredulous. Shocked. Those kinds of words, with a gaping mouth to match.

Why is it even surprising? Shen Yuan *does* always check for injuries and qi deviations. It’s like- like a bonding activity for them. It doesn’t matter if Airplane has been back for ages, because Mobei-Jun can teleport. And besides, Shen Yuan isn’t the only clumsy one.

So why hesitate now?

Whatever Airplane sees in his face must work. The man’s face flushes, and he huffs before he holds out one hand, palm up, wrist on display.

“Fine. But disciple Shen must make sure to tell Mu-shidi that this one is healthy,” Shang Qinghua says, and Shen Yuan nods and grabs his wrist.

Shang Qinghua is fine.

Shen Yuan leaves feeling oddly relieved.

Shang Qinghua and Wei Qingwei had said that he wouldn’t immediately go back to Qing Jing Peak, and Shen Yuan had heard them.

He also thought they were joking.

So when he finds himself on Wan Jian Peak, he doesn't quite know what to do. Except, of course, to cradle Soot in his arms and pet the pangolin as Wei Qingwei hums a merry tune, looking through the storage in which the disciples' robes are kept.

It's a small building, kept out of the way. Most of the buildings on Wan Jian Peak are built from stone and brick, and this one is no exception. Less smoke stained walls, definitely more quiet than the ruckus that is normally found on the peak. Smithing isn't known for being peaceful.

The inside itself is nothing but shelves and cupboards, robes of all sizes and cultivator ranks having been neatly folded into piles upon piles. Black and red, the occasional glimpses of white for disciples. A bunch of belts and gloves, too, which he guesses makes sense.

He wonders if they go through more clothes than Qing Jing does. Surely they must? Qing Jing Peak is all about reading and playing music and strategy games. Wan Jian Peak, a much cooler concept, is all about swords and the making of them. One requires far more fire and sharp objects than the other. Though ink stains *are* difficult to get rid of…

… there's also several pangolins napping all around them. Shen Yuan watches as Wei Qingwei moves yet again a snoozing ball of pangolin to a different shelf. They don't even twitch. Soot, still in his arms, makes a strange little sound and shifts, burrowing its face against his chest. The runes on its scales glow a little brighter before it settles back down.

Once again he wonders why they are on Wan Jian Peak.

Historically, pangolins have been used as medical ingredients. Logically, they should be on Qian Cao Peak.

Shen Yuan could ask. It's something he's been curious about for a while. But ever since they flew, he has been feeling tongue tied. Wei Qingwei had held him the whole way, talking about his own disciples, dropping the occasional bad pun and worse joke. One arm around him, and for whatever reason it reminded him of Binghe. Even though the arm placement had been different, the man is taller than Shen Yuan while Binghe is shorter. Both are so different.

And yet it reminded him of when he and Binghe flew to Qiong Ding Peak.

… but it's silly, being tongue tied. They aren't flying anymore. It should be easy to open his mouth, to ask a question he has wanted to ask since he first saw the pangolins on Wan Jian Peak.

"Does Shishu not wish to ask this one why I was at An Ding Peak?" he blurts out, and wishes he hadn't.

"Xiao-Shen is a child becoming a man," Wei Qingwei replies, holding out a pair of robes, measuring the length of it to Shen Yuan's height, "and Shen-shixiong is a strict man. It would be stranger if you didn't run off now and then. Hm, too short."

“That’s- that’s it?”

“You can’t wear too short robes! A-Fang would be disappointed.”

“That’s not- I’m,” Shen Yuan huffs, “Shishu is really not going to ask?”

Wei Qingwei looks at him. His eyes are sharp, but there is affection softening it. Makes it less scary, but all the more embarrassing to see aimed at himself.

“Do you truly want me to?”

Shen Yuan looks away.

There is no answer to that. The answer *should* be no. It’s embarrassing, far too embarrassing to talk about. He could barely even tell Airplane, and he *knew* what that guy had gotten up to in their past lives. But to tell anyone else is… would anyone even understand? It’s *Binghe.*

And even if Airplane happens to be gay, Shen Yuan hasn’t ever seen him *being* gay. But he has seen the way Wei Qingwei and Mu Qingfang act. He has shared breakfast with them, seen how they move around each other. Shen Yuan remembers watching them tend to the other’s needs, brushing each other’s hair and pouring tea and he remembers how he used to think about Binghe *every single time they did.*

Did he really like Binghe like *this* all the way back then?

He can’t fucking ask that. It makes no fucking sense to ask it, and besides, what if Wei Qingwei laughs at him? He would *die.*

Shen Yuan takes too long to answer.

“If Xiao-Shen truly wants to tell his uncle why he has been crying,” Wei Qingwei begins, and Shen Yuan jerks his head back up.

“I haven’t been crying!”

“Ah,” Wei Qingwei smiles, “so it is allergies that makes our poor Xiao-Shen so puffy eyed? Then maybe we should hurry to A-Fang, so that he may offer some advice instead?”

Shen Yuan had hoped the redness would go down. He touches the corner of one eye gingerly.

“Does it look that bad?” he asks miserably.

“Not as awful as Xiao-Shen thinks,” Wei Qingwei assures him, “though it may be embarrassing, one should not keep tears pangol- *in,* so it is good to cry them pangol- *out.”*

“When,” Shen Yuan says, “will Shishu give up on the pangolin puns? They don’t work.”

“If there is a wall of challenges, one must scale it.”

Shen Yuan looks down at Soot in his arms, taking note of its scales. He groans, and Wei Qingwei laughs.

“Here,” he says, “these robes should fit Xiao-Shen. Let this uncle take Soot off your hands, and I’ll wait outside as you change. Xiao-Shen can use the time to think more on whether he wishes to speak of his allergies or not. There is no rush.”

“Does this disciple *really* have to change clothes?”

“Ah, don’t be so cruel! I’m your favorite uncle, am I not? It will break my heart if you only wear *An Ding* robes.”

They weren’t *that* bad. In fact, Shen Yuan had found so many pockets. Though- well, the Wan Jian robes were pretty distinctive. He pictures Binghe in them, and blushes.

“Oh, and if it is concerning Fu Yue,” Wei Qingwei says, making him jump, “Xiao-Shen should not worry. Fu Yue will return eventually. It’s *far* too old to stay away for too long.” With that, the door closes.

Shen Yuan stares at it.

What the fuck did *that* mean?

(Quest: Discover the Moon Blade’s History!
Reward: 100 B-points + New Title.)

What the *fuck* did *new title* mean???

He had *enough* to worry about! What the fuck, why drop a fucking- a goddamn *quest,* one concerning a sword he didn’t even *have* right now when he was already dealing with a *tragic bromance* trope, fucking bitch-ass system piece of ***SHIT!!!***

“Didn’t I mute you?” he hisses.

(ง(ˆ•̀ ᴗ - ˆ•́) ✧)

Shen Yuan, aware of Wei Qingwei standing outside, does not scream.

But he very badly wants to.

When Shen Yuan steps out, the sun is in just the right position to blind him. He winces, squinting blearily to find Wei Qingwei, one hand fumbling around before he manages to close the door behind himself.

“Shishu?” he tries, and nearly jumps out of his own skin when the man lands beside him. Was he on the roof??? *Why?*

(+10 F-Points!)

“Red suits you,” Wei Qingwei praises him.

Shen Yuan manages to mumble a *thanks* back, willing his heart to calm down from the jumpscare. He smooths his hands over the white and red, the sword-less belt cinched around his waist. The only thing tucked into it is the fan which Shen Qingqiu gave him, and he hopes he won’t drop it. The man would think he did it on purpose, the bastard.

At least the little scare was a nice distraction from the damned System.

“So does Xiao-Shen wish to visit A-Fang now, or would he like to follow this uncle on a walk around the peak?” Wei Qingwei asks.

“Shishu wants to walk? Is he not busy?” Shen Yuan wonders. He doesn’t know where to put his hands; the robes came with wrist bracers, or maybe Wei Qingwei had slipped them in himself. It means that he can’t let the sleeves hang, can’t tuck his hands away from sight. It feels. Weird. He ends fluttering them oddly by his sides, before curling his fingers into loose fists.

“Terribly,” Wei Qingwei cheerfully agrees, giving Soot back to him. The pangolin is more awake now, yawning and hooking its claws over his shoulder. Shen Yuan runs a hand over its back. “But it has been a while since Xiao-Shen could pay a visit! Not only would A-Fang agree that a walk is good for a restless soul, but when will this uncle be able to spend time with Xiao-Shen again?”

Right. Right, because- because Shen Qingqiu.

He would be mad. But Wei Qingwei had told Shang Qinghua that he would take the blame. And- and the bastard *did* still have Fu Yue. Which–

(Quest: Discover the Moon Blade’s History!
Reward: 100 B-points + New Title.)

“A walk sounds nice,” Shen Yuan hears himself say, letting Soot climb up onto his shoulders, looping around like a very strange scarf, “and may I ask what did Shishu mean before? With- with Fu Yue?”

“That Xiao-Shen should not worry?”

“N-No,” he stutters, following as they begin to walk, “the- the old part. Why would Fu Yue’s age matter when it comes to me gaining it back?”

“Hmm. Well, Xiao-Shen is aware that all spirit swords have personality, is he not?”

“Of course.” How could he not? Fu Yue was calm and patient, Zheng Yang was bright and eager. Fu Yue was an undisturbed pond to Zheng Yang’s merry flame. Sun and moon, yin and yang. Polar opposites.

Honestly, it didn’t make sense that he and Binghe could wield them both, even if only for a short time. Mo Liqin certainly didn’t let anyone but Ning Yingying wield it with intent.

“Much like how babies must grow a personality, so must swords. A newly forged spirit sword *does* still show more personality than, say, a newborn babe. But it is always a very soft and moldable temper,” Wei Qingwei explains.

The way he speaks is in a rhythm. Up and down, engaging. Not like a droning professor. Something that makes it easy to listen.

Or maybe it’s just the subject? Shen Yuan had read about swords, Wei Qingwei *had* let him borrow that book, but… the way he speaks now is of experience. It’s different.

“So Fu Yue is stubborn because it is old? That’s it?”

“Not quite! A sword keeps a little bit of its wielder with it when the wielder dies,” Wei Qingwei says, gesturing towards the columns of steam and smoke in the distance, “the stronger the bond, the more qi a sword will have gathered. A spirit sword needs qi to move. A young sword, like disciple Ying’s, may not do much by itself. But an old sword like Fu Yue is capable of moving individually. When necessary, of course.”

Shen Yuan frowns, tracing the patterns in Soot’s tail.

“Then why hasn't Fu Yue come back? It’s been weeks since Shizun took it,” he says, and hates the way he sounds so *whiny.* But it’s true. If Fu Yue is old enough to move by itself, why hasn’t it done so already? Why is it just letting itself be kept hostage?

Wei Qingwei smiles at him. The sun makes the gray in his hair shine like steel, and his eyes glitter. Shen Yuan looks down, because there are stairs and he would hate to trip and fall while carrying Soot.

Looking down reminds him of what he is wearing. The red of the robes makes his mind catch, like cloth on a branch. Will this be the only time he wears red? Or will he wear it anywhere else but his dreams? Dreams which he shouldn’t even be having–

“Fu Yue will know when to return on its own,” Wei Qingwei says, steadying Shen Yuan when he nearly slips in his distraction, “this uncle of yours told you long ago that I would research Fu Yue, did I not? I have found out many interesting things, and of this, I’m certain.” He grins. “Now, does Xiao-Shen need to hold my hand to avoid any accidents?”

Shen Yuan shakes his head, face bright red, and yanks his hands back from where he had grabbed at the man during his near slip. What had he even slipped on? A pebble?

“N-No! No, I’m fine, Shishu. Um. So- so what is it that Shishu has found?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that yet.”

The embarrassment swiftly turns into offense.

“Why can’t Shishu tell me *now?”*

“Xiao-Shen has been having a lot on his mind,” Wei Qingwei says, and Shen Yuan definitely does not reach up to hide his reddened eyes, though he is very tempted to do so, “and learning is not always an enjoyable thing. Sometimes, what one finds out can be shocking enough to disturb your very core. Maybe they find out their father was slain by it, or that all the wielders have met a certain fate. Maybe everyone died to goats, and now the wielder is scared of goats. It is better that an unbiased party reads about it, and *then* reveals what has been found. Just to avoid accidents.”

“But- but it’s *Fu Yue,”* Shen Yuan says, bewildered, “what could be so shocking that I can’t learn about it?”

“Ah, it could be goats.”

“Shishu,” Shen Yuan protests, “please! Just- is- is Shishu saying that Fu Yue is *bad?”*

“Far from it.”

Shen Yuan had the sudden urge to stomp his foot. To throw a tantrum. Like, fuck! He already had enough on his plate! Why couldn’t Wei Qingwei just *tell him?*

And he couldn’t die from goats. Shen Yuan was *definitely* fated for something cliche, not comedic. If he died to goats, he would- would-

Well, he would do something!

“All I can tell you,” Wei Qingwei says, “is to focus on the present. The future can wait. Alright?”

It wasn’t alright.

But for all his smiles and dimples, the man was still a Peak Lord. When Shen Yuan looks at him now, he knows the man won’t change his mind.

He huffs.

“Fine,” Shen Yuan says.

“That’s my favorite nephew,” Wei Qingwei praises, and gently pokes his forehead, “now, shall we go meet A-Fang? Or maybe find that boy of yours. Would that help with Xiao-Shen’s allergies?”

The idea of Binghe seeing him all puffy eyed makes his entire head feel like it’s on fire. He shakes his head.

“Mu-shishu please,” Shen Yuan blurts out, and Wei Qingwei gives him a knowing smile.

“Then off to A-Fang we go."

Chapter End Notes

LBH: I can't find Yuan anywhere. He will miss lunch! He can't go hungry! He isn't at the tree or the library and not even MING FAN has seen him!
NYY: Maybe A-Yuan left the peak? But why! And how! And why without US? I want to go too!
LBH: ..... there is only one place he would go without me. *shoves apron at NYY* here, hold this.
NYY: okay Shidi, I'll hold your apron!

SQH: ah, I am finally free of Emotions. Time to take a nap, that shit was exhausting-
LBH: *slams open door* THIS ONE GREETS SHISHU.
SQH: *shrieks*

Honestly, once WQW got in he refused to get out. I feel like I've been held at sword point as I tried to coax SY out of his arms or something, like pls, sir, I wish to move on. But he decided to drop some sword lore that I was going to put in at a later time, so I can't complain too much.

Hi guys! Thanks for being so patient despite that I'm late. But, more importantly.

CHAPTER 50!
WE REACHED IT!
That is actually insane, wow. I think I might buy a cake to celebrate after work. FIFTY CHAPTERS! Thank you, all of you who have stuck with this story. I know long chaptered fics can be scary to take a chance at, and oh boy, you guys who have been here from the start? The patience! Insane! I love you all! It was your encouragement that got me this far, and I am forever grateful. Truly.

I'm a little emotional, but I think I deserve to be.

And now! Fanart!! WOO!!!

Raindeathlily has once again gifted us with two amazing arts!
the Tree incident and a Soggy Boy

And does anyone remember Lady Jia? theImpurelily sure did and I love it!

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The magnolia is in bloom.

Qian Cao Peak has many gardens dedicated to plants which are useful for healing, the kind that can't be mass produced on the fields of Long Sheng Peak. What it does *not* have much of is actual wild plants, the kind that requires little care, like grass and wildflowers.

It's likely because Qian Cao Peak is heavily inhabited, with carved stone paths made for easy travel. Each garden has been planned for the exact purpose of offering some kind of healing, whether that is to provide ingredients or a sense of peace for troubled minds. Though maybe that is just how it is for the other peaks. Shen Yuan has never visited Long Sheng Peak, but a peak dedicated to agriculture and feng shui can't look that natural either.

Maybe Qing Jing Peak is the greenest and wildest of them all, with its bamboo forest and mossy stones, with the winding, narrow paths curving in between hills rather than flattening them.

But Qian Cao Peak *does* have plenty of magnolia.

It's a tree that blooms in the winter and early spring. The pink flowers are tipped with white, bobbing in the wind as Shen Yuan trails after Wei Qingwei. The flowers can be made into tea.

It's Mu Qingfang's favorite kind.

Shen Yuan fidgets with the fan, because he had to leave Soot back on Wan Jian Peak. He doesn't know *why,* exactly, because he very much remembers waking up after the demon invasion with a pangolin on top of him, and doesn't see any reason for why this would be different. But Wei Qingwei had insisted, and so Shen Yuan had reluctantly pried the pangolin off of himself. And now all he has is a fan.

"Is Shishu *sure* that we won't bother Mu-shishu?" he asks as they pass a group of disciples- sleeves tipped in different colors, to highlight what kind of healing they are learning. What color would *he* wear if…?

"A-Fang needs to take a break. Xiao-Shen is a good incentive for him to do so," Wei Qingwei assures him, looking around as they walk. Shen Yuan is trying to not walk too close, or be distracted by how the man's ponytail swings with each step, curls bouncing with each one. He wonders how long it will be, before Binghe's hair is that long.

"Good incentive?" Shen Yuan mutters to himself, flipping the fan open and closed as they walk, catching glimpses of the painted plum blossoms on it each time.

It is only when they turn down a path which Shen Yuan *knows* leads away from the healing halls that he begins to wonder if Wei Qingwei knows where they are going.

Like, he had *assumed* the man did. But, uh. Maybe not? Maybe Wei Qingwei only knows the way to the *house?*

“Shishu,” Shen Yuan says, “perhaps we should… turn back…?”

“Why would we do that?” Wei Qingwei merrily replies, continuing onwards, “did this one not tell Xiao-Shen we would dress him up?”

Oh. Oh!

“So we are going to get a uniform?” Shen Yuan wonders, closing the fan with a snap before he tucks it into the belt, hurrying until he walks next to the older man, “before we meet Mu-shishu, I mean?”

“As much as I would like to show you off to everyone in Wan Jian red, A-Fang would *much* prefer seeing Xiao-Shen in Qian Cao colors.” Wei Qingwei glances at him, smiling enough to show off his dimples. “Does Xiao-Shen know what stripes he would like to wear?”

“I… I don’t know,” Shen Yuan admits, “this one never memorized all the different colors. Does Shishu know?”

“Of course! Green is for those who specialize in poison treatments, black for heart demons… ah, though this one doesn’t think blue is a choice for Xiao-Shen.”

Blue? Shen Yuan tries to remember, and falls short.

“Death care,” Wei Qingwei explains, seeing his confusion, “generally for the elderly or those who have something incurable- like *without a cure.* There were a few who were poisoned with it during the attack. Has Xiao-Shen heard of it?”

Shen Yuan manages a nod, feeling sick. He spares a quick moment to pulse his qi, just to feel it flowing smoothly through his meridians. But of course he doesn’t have it. He was lucky, despite everything.

“It’s… it’s a poison that cripples cultivation and leads to a slow death if one’s cultivation isn’t high enough,” he says. “This one read about it.” It’s more like that he remembers the original, when Qin Wanyu was poisoned with it at the Immortal Alliance Conference. She would have died, if not for Binghe. Because the poison’s name was a lie, because all one had to do was to–

Shen Yuan shuts down that thought.

“Indeed. Does Xiao-Shen have an interest in poison, then?”

“No, Shishu. This one prefers to treat injuries.”

“Then white fits best. Though this one most often works with those who wear purple.”

“What does purple stand for?” Shen Yuan wonders, more than happy to focus on this rather than- well, *other* things. He is here to take his mind off of it, anyway! And he vaguely remembers seeing purple quite often. “Burns? Because of- of the forge?”

“A good guess! I see you *burn* with passion for the craft,” Wei Qingwei jokes, and if it had been Airplane, Shen Yuan would have jabbed him in the side as hard as he could. “But no. Remember how spirit swords are closely tied to qi? This means Wan Jian and Qian Cao must often work together when it comes to qi deviations. It’s very fascinating, truly.”

“That makes sense,” Shen Yuan agrees, furrowing his brows, “but wouldn’t it make more sense for their stripes to be red then? To match Wan Jian Peak?”

“Red stands for dual cultivation.”

Shen Yuan trips.

“What!” he squawks, face burning hot, “w-what- there’s, there’s-” Specialists? In *dual cultivation?* Wasn’t that just *whores!?*

“Of course there are. Dual cultivation may *appear* easy, but it involves quite a lot of qi manipulation while, ah.” Wei Qingwei grins, sly as a fox, “performing certain activities.” A pause. “A-Fang is a prodigy, of course.”

Of course he is. Mu Qingfang was the only peak lord *allowed* to live after Luo Binghe razed the sect to the ground, because he was literally the best healer in the entire *world.* Of course he is a prodigy! But why would- that is, why would Wei Qingwei mention that with–

“But his specialty was dual cultivation,” Wei Qingwei continues, and Shen Yuan is dying, dead, about to fucking explode, “ah, this one remembers how well those red stripes suited him. I must say, this one was very lucky to have such a splendid first time. Actually, the storage shed we are going to is where-”

Shen Yuan doesn’t want to listen anymore.

“I’m going ahead!” he yells and rushes down the path, ignoring Wei Qingwei’s loud laughter behind him, the *ding!* sounds of the System giving out points.

He is so busy ignoring all of it that he runs straight into someone else. It nearly knocks him over, limbs flailing and a squeak escaping him.

“Ah, this one apologizes to Shixiong,” the other person says, steading Shen Yuan before he can fall, “this one wasn’t paying attention and-” the boy stops speaking.

“No, it was this one’s fault,” Shen Yuan says, mortified, except when he looks up from patting down his red robes, he finds himself meeting a familiar face. “Zhu-shixiong?” he blurts out.

Zhu Kang’s auburn eyes stared back, wide with surprise.

“Shen-shidi,” he says, and then straightens up, offering a small bow, “this one didn’t know that Shen-shidi moved to Wan Jian!”

“Oh, no, I’m- I haven’t, this one had a… an *accident.”* Wait, no, that sounds like he pissed his pants or something. Fuck! “I slipped and fell and- well, um, Wei-shishu was kind enough to let this one borrow a set and- and how are you! It’s been so long since this one saw Shixiong!”

Zhu Kang smiles at him, warm and kind. There is a flower petal on his head, a bright spot of color against the copper brown hair. Magnolia.

“This one has been well,” Zhu Kang says, and stops.

“Sorry,” Shen Yuan apologizes, holding out the petal in explanation, silky soft between his fingers, “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Zhu Kang’s cheeks are pink as he gingerly reaches out. He presses one finger against the petal, lingering, before he clears his throat.

“This one thanks Shen-shidi for the help,” he says, eyes flicking back to meet Shen Yuan’s, “and this one is happy to see that Shidi’s hands have recovered. Would it be alright if I asked to examine them?”

Ah, right. They haven’t met since Shen Yuan’s hands were wrapped up and immobile, recovery seeming a lifetime away. He remembers how tired and pitiful Zhu Kang had been, softly asking for permission to check on Shen Yuan’s meridians.

“To see the progress?” Shen Yuan asks, and lets the petal fall to the ground as he holds both hands out, “of course! This one trusts Shixiong’s opinion.”

The smile he gains in return is flustered. Ah, Zhu Kang! Always so humble and reliable.

“Not sure we have the time,” Wei Qingwei cuts in, bright and cheerful and making them both jump from his sudden appearance, “but maybe Zhu-shizhi can give us a *hand!* Do you perhaps know where A-Fang is?”

“This one apologizes for not seeing Shibo earlier,” Zhu Kang says, offering a quick bow, doing a *much* better job at looking like he didn’t lose maybe ten years of his life from the jumpscare than, say, Shen Yuan is. “Last this one saw Shifu, he was walking towards the blue garden. He should still be there, unless there was an emergency.”

“Ah, to the east it is then. *After* we dress Xiao-Shen in the proper attire, of course.”

Zhu Kang tilts his head.

“We do not keep Qing Jing robes here,” he says, confused, “we only keep the uniforms of Qian Cao Peak. If Shibo wishes to find Qing Jing robes for Shen-shidi, there may be a few spare ones near the healing halls?”

Well, that made sense. Hell, if Shen Yuan thought about it; shouldn't there still be a few of his personal clothes back at Mu Qingfang's house?

"Oh, no, we are not looking for *those,"* Wei Qingwei says, nudging Shen Yuan along, "if this master has gotten to see Xiao-Shidi in the robes of Wan Jian, then A-Fang deserves to see Xiao-Shen in Qian Cao's."

And so they leave.

Zhu Kang stares after them, picturing Shen Yuan in Qian Cao robes. He blushes, then shakes his head before he hurries off, tying up his white striped sleeves as he goes.

Despite its name, the Blue Garden has very little actual *blue* in it.

Surrounded by white stone walls, it's a square of many tinier squares that can be found on the east side of Qian Cao Peak. Each square is labeled, containing one to four different plants, and each square is separated with narrow stone paths going in orderly lines between them.

The only non-square thing is the pond in the very middle. It is a perfect circle, somehow managing to reflect the sunlight right into Shen Yuan's eyes when they enter.

The pond, Shen Yuan notes, might be the only blue thing in the garden.

Not the pond itself; the water is as clear as glass, allowing a full view of the aquatic plants grown in it, most of which are either a boring brown-green or in psychedelic colors befitting a world like *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* But in between all those plants are round stones painted a bright blue, matching the bright blue stones which line the pond itself.

It's a very nice garden. Very peaceful, looking very harmless. There is no reason at all to be scared of it.

Shen Yuan lingers by the entrance, watching as Wei Qingwei makes his merry way towards the man crouched in the far corner.

He quickly looks away when Wei Qingwei leans down to kiss Mu Qingfang, feeling an odd *twinge* in his chest. It's- it's still weird, of course, seeing two grown men *kissing.* But. Maybe not gross. Or bad-weird. Just… it's just…

What would it be like? To–

Shen Yuan kicks that thought to the curb and walks into the garden.

Mu Qingfang has stood up by now, a woven basket resting in the crook of his arm. The two men are standing close, murmuring to each other, voices so low that Shen Yuan can't hear a word even as he forces himself to get closer. He is approaching from Mu Qingfang's blind side, but he is certain that the man can still hear him approach. Shen Yuan isn't trying to be stealthy.

Shen Yuan keeps his hands in front, hunching a little bit, too aware of the white striped sleeves, the way these robes hang a little looser than the ones from Wan Jian Peak. Like Qing Jing, truly. It makes sense. Loose clothes near forges is a fire hazard. Both are comfortable, but what if Wei Qingwei is wrong? What if seeing Shen Yuan in these robes won't make Mu Qingfang smile, but instead make him angry? Or- not angry, maybe. But something just as bad.

"Shizhi," Wei Qingwei says, "come, help A-Fang with harvesting!"

"Shixiong should not order this one's disciples around," Mu Qingfang replies as he turns around, eyes landing on Shen Yuan's sleeves before they go upwards, ending at Shen Yuan's face.

The very air seems to grow still, and Shen Yuan's heart stutters within his chest.

"Yuan-er?" Mu Qingfang says, face blank.

Just like when he told Shen Yuan how badly he had fucked up.

"I fell!" Shen Yuan bursts out, hiding behind a bow, "I- I fell! This one apologizes, if- if Mu-shishu takes offense at this one wearing… should this one go and change? Zhu-shixiong said there were Qing Jing robes if- if this one needed them, I'm…"

Hands press down his arms. A firm pressure but still gentle. Shen Yuan lets them drop, eyes trained on the ground. The stone beneath his feet has dirt scattered over it, dark crumbs looking nearly black against it.

"Yuan-er," Mu Qingfang says again, cool fingers tilting Shen Yuan's head up, forcing him to meet the man's gaze, "slowly."

Oh.

Shen Yuan's chest is heaving, his heart thundering, the palm of his hands hot and itchy. He gulps air like he forgot to breathe, like he only just now surfaced. Ridiculous.

He leans into the hand cradling his face and breathes.

"There we go," Mu Qingfang says, stroking his thumb against his cheek before he pulls the hand away, "this master does not mind, he was only surprised. Did your other Shishu bully you into this?"

"Maybe a little," Shen Yuan mumbles, rubbing at one cheek.

“Betrayal!” Wei Qingwei cries out, looking delighted, “by my beloved *and* my favorite nephew? How low I have fallen!”

“Yes, yes,” Mu Qingfang replies, looking fondly amused, and suddenly Shen Yuan is holding the basket full of plants as Mu Qingfang gives the other man’s chest a hard poke, “Wei-ge’s wicked ways have been revealed. Shall he flee, then, before this one alerts the whole mountain?”

“Aish,” the other man says, clutching at the spot where he was poked, acting as if he was stabbed, “must I?” His eyes flick away, to something behind Shen Yuan, and his smile widens, “ah, I must! Let this horrible one steal one last kiss for the road, before I flee from my crimes.”

Shen Yuan hurriedly averts his eyes to the basket, deciding the contents are *much* more interesting. Actually, holy shit, is this lichen *sparkling?*

He pokes around in the basket, trying to figure out what they are all named. *This* is why he doesn’t go for poison; there’s just too much of it in this world, like a hundred plants for every beast, which means millions of poisons and cures and honestly, who has the time to memorize all of that? Plus how to prepare the ingredients depending on what one needs and… yeah no. Injuries are much more straightforward.

But also, there’s what looks like iridescent strawberries in the basket, cradled between the sparkling lichen and ordinary mint leaves.

“Would Yuan-er like to tell this one the reason for his visit?” Mu Qingfang asks, and Shen Yuan yanks his hand away from the basket, smiling sheepishly at the man. Wei Qingwei is gone, having disappeared sometime during the distraction.

“Um,” he says, and stops.

Why *is* he here?

Wei Qingwei had taken him to Qian Cao Peak, but… but what other reason is there? Shen Yuan can’t come up with one.

It’s not like he can tell Mu Qingfang that he had a stupid meltdown about liking his best friend. That he ran off to An Ding Peak because of it, and that Shen Qingqiu will kill him for it. That it’s all because Shen Yuan has realized he likes a boy who he can’t ever have, who will marry his Shijie and so many more and… and who he still wants to stay with, even though it might kill him and- and–

What could he *possibly* say? It sounds crazy. It *is* crazy.

He stands there, frozen with indecision. Mu Qingfang watches him patiently, before the man hums to himself.

“Your other Shishu said that Yuan-er has had trouble with allergies,” he says knowingly, “and that he wants advice on them. However, there is no need to tell this master if you are not

ready. We can spend this time catching up instead, perhaps while harvesting what we need? Yuan-er has not been here before, has he?"

Shen Yuan manages a nod, feeling near dizzy with relief.

"This one would like to help Shishu," he says.

"Very well."

And so Mu Qingfang explains as they move between plants; not only how to harvest what they need, but what each plant does. There is black moss, kept for nothing else but to house tiny, blue mushrooms which *chirp* when one moves near them, picking up on the vibrations in the air. There are skeleton flowers, which he remembers seeing in a different life, when his family visited Japan that one time. Only *these* leech off of bones to grow, because of course they fucking do.

Airplane just has to spice things up.

"Shishu," he asks as they poke around for the white berries of the *glistening moon bush,* which sounds *so* wrong, "is there a system as to what plants are in which garden? Do these all only grow in the east, or- or something?"

"Not as such," Mu Qingfang replies, eating one berry. Shen Yuan warily does the same, and screws up his face at the sourness of it, to Mu Qingfang's amusement, "these plants cannot cross-pollinate."

Huh.

"That's sensible," Shen Yuan says, remembering the mint. Was it mint that could breed with anything? Or was that, like, lemons? Maybe mint was the plant that could take *over* and choke out the competition? Fuck, he was never good with plants. "Because… because if the chirping mushrooms crossed with the fanged ones in Shishu's personal garden…"

"It would be quite unfortunate. Some hybridization is useful, but that is for Long Sheng Peak to experiment with. Or Xi Jiao Peak, when it comes to beasts."

"Right, like mules!"

"Indeed."

Shen Yuan hums, thinking. Were there any other crossbreeds he knew? Some special to *Proud Immortal Demon Way?* Except for- well, except for the… the obvious one.

Binghe was rare, though. Binghe was, technically, a miracle.

Half-demons were rare to begin with. Even between different demons, things could become difficult. Humans *and* demon pairings had rarely been considered viable; hell, the original made it clear that if any of Luo Binghe's children survived, it was almost always because the mother was a demon.

Not to speak of *Heavenly* demons.

Shen Yuan rolls one berry around in his hand. In the sunlight, it's nearly translucent. Angled just right, one can see the seeds within. They are crescent shaped. Like moons, like Fu Yue's handle.

"Shishu," he says, "if… if- if Wei-shishu were to… to like s-someone else. Would- would you still be friends? Even though… even though you used to be… um. A- a pair?"

"... an interesting question," Mu Qingfang says, even and calm.

Shen Yuan doesn't dare to look up. He focuses instead on the berry, how it rests in the center of his palm. Because it's a *stupid* question to ask. How could one be friends after something like that? That seemed- well, bad! Weird! Impossible!

Hell, Shen Yuan had heard *stories* from classmates whose parents were divorced. Crazy ones. The beginning of *this-is-based-on-a-true-story* -documentary kind of stories.

"It may take some work on both parts, but this one believes it would be manageable," Mu Qingfang says.

"Really?" Shen Yuan blurts out.

When he looks up, Mu Qingfang only looks faintly amused.

"We were friends before we became lovers," Mu Qingfang says, "and Wei-ge worked hard to make it happen. This one was not so… tolerating, of others. Not when we were young. He always seemed to show up whenever I least expected it, and always when I needed it the most. He continues to do so even now; bringing you here today was a pleasant surprise. So yes. Even if we were to stop being lovers, I would like to remain friends, and so would he. As such we would work to maintain it."

"Even if he found someone else? Someone he would- would marry?"

"Even then."

Shen Yuan looks back down at the berry.

"What if," he says haltingly, feeling his face grow hot even as he forces the words out, bit by bit, "w-what if you never became a couple? W-What if… what if he liked someone else, while y-you still liked… him? What then?"

"Are we still friends in this scenario?" Mu Qingfang asks, so damn knowingly. How could he not be? Shen Yuan's skin is *crawling* with this, knowing he is putting all the cards on the table.

Just because he isn't- isn't *naming* the cards, the game, the *rules,* doesn't mean that Mu Qingfang doesn't know about it. Anyone can see a card game is a game of cards.

“Yes,” Shen Yuan says, and eats the berry just to have an excuse to make a face, “yes, friends. Mmhm.”

“I would likely be jealous,” Mu Qingfang admits, giving Shen Yuan another berry, “but if our friendship remains, I would try to be happy for him. It might be difficult, but it would be worth it. A friend is too valuable to give up on for that reason. Good ones can be difficult to find.”

And that…

Makes sense.

Shen Yuan blinks at the berry in his hands, a little bigger than the one he just ate. His tongue is tingling from it, and the berry is cold from the crisp Spring air. He rolls it around, cupping his hands around it as he thinks, as he finds himself lingering on the healer’s words.

Binghe is his friend.

This has been a simple, immutable fact since they first met by the foot of the mountain, since Shen Yuan had first dared to ask to sit by Binghe’s little campfire, feeling like he was about to tremble apart from the cold. They are friends. *Best* friends. A thing that he had barely dared to dream about, back when he lived with Lady Jia. Luo Binghe had seemed to be this far-away, unattainable figure back then.

And now he is *Binghe.*

Shen Yuan knows they are friends, and has known it for years now. Just like he has always known he will be the sidekick, the wingman, the friend who will help Binghe make all those difficult decisions.

Just because he happens to like Binghe a little too much…

It doesn't change the fact that Binghe is his best friend. That he wants to stay by his side, all the way until this story ends. Even if he might get hurt. Even if he will *definitely* get hurt.

It’s not like Shen Yuan ever expected to find love, anyway. So what if he found it in Binghe? It won’t change anything. So what if it would be safer to stay at the sect? To become the distant childhood friend? A peaceful life will be nothing but monotonous boredom without his friend.

As long as he can stay by Binghe’s side, isn’t that enough?

“Oh,” he says, and lets the berry roll into the basket, into the little pouch reserved for it and its brethren, “thank you, Shishu.”

“Glad to be of help,” Mu Qingfang replies, bemused.

Shen Yuan smiles back, a little wobbly, but it’s fine.

He’s made his decision.

Wei Qingwei scratches at his chin as he walks into the house. It is empty, as it should be. No one but Qian Cao's Peak Lord should be inside; none but him and his very charming lover, of course.

Behind him, the door stays open for a moment too long, cold seeping in before it finally closes with a decisive *snap.* There is half a moment where he thinks his guest ran off, before there is the soft, soft sound of fabric against fabric, someone shifting where they stand. So no fleeing, then. Only the threat of it, with how they stick to the door.

Fair.

"Magnolia tea?" Wei Qingwei asks, making his way towards the kitchen, "there is plenty of it. Seasonal and all that!"

"No," is the terse reply.

"Is Shixiong sure?"

Frosty silence is all that greets him. Wei Qingwei shrugs and abandons the search. It would be awkward, after all, to be the only one drinking. And he has heard *plenty* of stories when it concerns Shen Qingqiu and hot tea. There is no need to make Mu Qingfang upset.

Wei Qingwei leans against the doorframe to the kitchen, meeting the eyes of Shen Qingqiu. Green, just like the boy's. Unusual eye colors often pop up in talented bloodlines. A-Fang has a theory all about it.

"This one is glad Shixiong came when this one asked," he says.

"Shidi claimed this wouldn't take long," Shen Qingqiu replies, "perhaps he should keep that promise, before this master's patience runs out."

Before he marches off to scruff Shen Yuan.

Wei Qingwei smiles.

"This Shidi has a request of Shixiong, and thought it would be best to discuss it in private," he says, "would Shixiong be kind and hear this one out?"

"Disciple Shen is *not* changing peaks," Shen Qingqiu says, tilting his chin up, standing as straight as the bamboo of his peak, daring anyone to cut him down.

"That's not what this Shidi was going to request," Wei Qingwei replies. Not that he doesn't *want* Xiao-Shen to transfer. He seems to have a talent for the healing arts, after all. And it would make A-Fang happy.

Shen Qingqiu, being the man he is, doesn't seem convinced.

"So he is wearing Qian Cao robes for no reason? Does Shidi take this one for a fool?" Shen Qingqiu snaps, "what other reason would disciple Shen be wearing the robes of a different peak than his own?"

"Disciple Shen is very clumsy," Wei Qingwei points out, "he needed a change of robes, and this one provided."

"Qian Cao robes."

"Well, Wan Jian at first. Only seemed fair to dress him in Qian Cao colors as well."

Ah, there it is. The look of enraged confusion, the eyes of a man who would like to stomp on the drunk rat before him. It is a look which Wei Qingwei is very familiar with. He smiles, and watches Shen Qingqiu bristle at the sight of it.

"This Shidi's request," he says before his martial brother can, "is for Shixiong to let disciple Shen to visit Qian Cao Peak."

There is a twitch, a near furrow of the brows.

"Is he hurt?"

"He's not. We miss him, that is all."

"Miss him," Shen Qingqiu repeats, then scoffs, "the answer is no."

"Then could Shixiong return disciple Shen's sword?"

"So that he can repeat today? Visit without this master's permission?" *Is Shidi an idiot,* Wei Qingwei hears, loud and clear between every line. "No. The sword will be returned when he has earned it."

When Wei Qingwei was a child, his mother told him to never run with knives. When he grew older, his Shizun told him to never wield a blade against his martial family. The same person, the same advice, simply worded differently.

The problem, Wei Qingwei thinks, is that Shen Qingqiu speaks as if every conversation is a dishonorable duel. He wields his words like one wields a sword, all the while expecting the other to throw poisoned needles when he least expects it. He does not expect a mutual agreement.

He wants to win, not negotiate.

Shen Yuan is a boy who does nothing but.

"We are family," he says.

Shen Qingqiu barks a laugh; short and mean, disbelieving.

“This one is aware we entered the sect differently,” Wei Qingwei continues, “but it’s true. The sect is our family.”

“Such a loving family it is then. Truly harmonious,” Shen Qingqiu says, each word dripping with sarcasm, like a snake’s fangs dripping with venom.

Wei Qingwei shrugs.

“A family does not always get along,” he allows, “but it is our duty as the leaders of this sect, that we try our best to do so.” He steps away from the doorframe, ignoring the way Shen Qingqiu’s hand falls to Xiu Ya in response. Wei Qingwei continues, “this Shidi understands the desire to keep Shen Yuan safe, but is locking him up in this manner truly worth it? You can’t expect a knife that has never been sharpened to cut, and you can’t expect a cultivator who has never seen battle to defend himself.”

Shen Qingqiu’s fingers wrap around Xiu Ya. It is a barely there movement, the man standing still as a painting.

“Is that a threat?” Shen Qingqiu asks, cold as steel.

“It is *advice,”* Wei Qingwei replies, “we all care for the boy.”

“He is not yours to care for.”

It is Wei Qingwei’s turn to laugh.

“Does Shixiong truly believe that?” he asks as he gestures to all around them, “you left him with us for a year. Did you not expect us to grow fond of him?”

“I *expected* Mu Qingfang to ensure the child wouldn’t succumb to qi deviations,” Shen Qingqiu snaps back, “but as this master has returned, there is no need for it. The child is *not* leaving Qing Jing Peak. This master repeats; he is not yours to care for.”

Wei Qingwei is *not* going to pinch his nose. He is *not* going to groan, nor voice how much he dislikes the man before him. It would be rude and unhelpful, and that is the least thing Shen Yuan needs. Fu Yue, hanging by Shen Qingqiu’s waist, is enough of a reminder of that.

The boy’s fate is already going to be difficult.

He’s not going to add *more* to it.

“Shixiong speaks as if this one intends to steal his beloved pet,” Wei Qingwei bites out at last, “but we only wish to offer support to a nephew, who seems in need of guidance.”

They stare at each other.

Shen Qingqiu remains where he is, the man’s hand having relaxed enough to merely rest upon Xiu Ya’s pommel. The rest of him is still tense, a predator ready to lunge.

Perhaps if Wei Qingwei was generous, he could point out the traits the two Shen share. There is the bristling distrust, that edge of something *uneasy* that seems to linger in every movement. The superficial similarities are many, with their green eyes and their identical frowns, with how Shen Yuan's face has begun to grow sharper as he ages.

But there are far more differences than similarities.

"What support could *you* offer?"

Wei Qingwei blinks.

He had not expected the man to break the silence first; not without accompanying it with a door slamming shut. But there he is. Shen Qingqiu, staring him down. Daring him to speak.

Wei Qingwei has never backed down from a dare.

"I'm not sure," he admits, and it is Shen Qingqiu's turn to blink, thrown off by it, "but any support which Xiao-Shen seeks, this one will provide."

"You intend to coddle him."

"Sure, if that's what he needs."

Shen Qingqiu eyes him. Looking for openings, a weakness to stab at, a lie to expose. Wei Qingwei lets him look his fill, idly wondering if Xiao-Shen has told Mu Qingfang of his troubles yet. Hopes that the kid hadn't noticed how quickly Wei Qingwei had left, nor the reason for it. It would just worry him.

"Shidi would use the child's naivety against this one."

"I would not."

"Don't lie. It is clear that Shidi has no *fondness* of this master."

"Few do," Wei Qingwei points out, and Shen Qingqiu scoffs, "ah, don't deny it. Shixiong has worked hard to ensure it. But I don't have to like you to respect you. I like Xiao-Shen plenty. And the boy likes *you."*

Or he at least wanted Shen Qingqiu's approval.

"If he didn't, Shen Yuan would have already tried to steal Fu Yue back by now," Wei Qingwei says.

Shen Qingqiu, who had been bristling to counter him, falters. His lips grow thin, as if biting back words. His hand is back on Xiu Ya, but it does not feel like a threat.

"It wouldn't even be difficult," Wei Qingwei continues, "their bond is good, and the boy's qi is plenty. Today, I saw how much his hands have recovered. He could *easily* call Fu Yue back. But he hasn't. Because, in the end, that boy wants to earn his Shizun's approval."

He pauses. Waits for Shen Qingqiu to speak.

The man remains silent.

“I will not ask Shixiong to return the sword to him,” Wei Qingwei says, watching him carefully, “I will only repeat my first request. Please allow Xiao-Shen to visit Qian Cao Peak.”

Show him that he has earned enough trust for that.

“... we are returning to Qing Jing,” Shen Qingqiu says.

With that, the man turns and walks away. The door is slammed shut, and Wei Qingwei sighs and drags one hand down his face.

Well, it wasn’t a *no.*

Sometimes one has to take what they can.

Chapter End Notes

Later that day:
WQW: so what were Xiao-Shen's allergies about?
MQF: hm. Not quite sure.
WQW: really??? A-Fang couldn't make him talk???
MQF: well, at first it seemed that he and disciple Luo broke up.
WQW: *gasps*
MQF: and then it came to light that they were never together to begin with.
WQW: HOW??? I was sure- Not even a little? How is that possible!
MQF: Teenagers.
WQW: Teenagers...

Also WQW: SQQ can you stop being a paranoid bitch for ONE second
SQQ: *hisses*

waves hi hello!!! Hasn't this past week been delightful? Big bang!!! So many new fics in the fandom!!! WOW!!! If anyone was unaware, svsss had a massive bing bang event and it's STILL ongoing. Not all fics have been released yet! I love this fandom, it's so endlessly creative, there's so many new things to read and I can't even choose where to start... I feel very spoiled.

btw, I love SQQ. I do however think someone needs to shake some sense into him though.

Anyway, thanks as always for reading, and for being so patient with me as I find my feet!

And here comes an INSANE amount of fanart!

Donnadonera drew SY in his lil' fashion show <3

s-kittynb drew SY and Binghe being adorable!

jay-birdxxx drew SY getting a well-deserved hug from WQW~!

Linecrosser has drawn two!
qi deviating SY and MQF hugging SY

Raindeathlily returns with three!!! :0
Lin Jie chomping on his Shizun , then there is YQY adoring a grumpy SY and last but not least, there is
SY braiding Binghe's hair

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Where did A-Yuan *go!?"* are the first words which Ning Yingying blurts out when they are all alone.

Not that Luo Binghe blames her; it's not too different from the question which he was about to ask himself.

Shen Yuan sniffles from behind the handkerchief, scrubbing his face one last time. When he lowers it, not much has changed. His eyes look even greener when lined with red, his nose dripping with snot and he can't seem to keep his mouth closed because of it, gasping for air every time he tries. His lips are darker than normal; just a shade of it, but enough that Binghe keeps finding himself staring at them.

Wherever Shen Qingqiu had found Shen Yuan, the man hadn't been happy about it. It was only a short time ago that Shen Yuan slunk out of the bamboo house, making the dying face reserved for the jar of chilis which Shen Qingqiu had begun to keep near his desk. From the look of it, he must have forced Shen Yuan to eat at least three of them. And then withheld water.

Shen Yuan's eyes are so *green* like this.

"What does Shijie mean?" Shen Yuan says, though it's barely comprehensible with how congested he sounds.

"We couldn't find you," Luo Binghe says, and takes the handkerchief from his friend's hands, fingers brushing. He presses it pointedly to Shen Yuan's nose until, finally, Shen Yuan blows into it. He looks embarrassed by the action, though Luo Binghe doesn't understand why. Was that truly the reason he *hadn't* done it until just now?

Despite everything, Luo Binghe can't help but feel warm, biting back a smile as he lets Shen Yuan take back the handkerchief.

His friend is always stubborn about the strangest things.

"A-Luo even went to An Ding!" Ning Yingying says, too loudly to be a proper whisper, no matter how hushed she tries to keep it. They are still close to the bamboo house, sitting on the stairs a few steps below. Out of sight, but likely still within hearing distance. Luo Binghe's fingers curl against his knees, wondering if a man of such high cultivation must focus his hearing like they do, or if he can hear everything without effort. His hands ache at the thought, and he rubs one thumb against his palm, able to recall the feel of an axe's handle.

He has been chopping a lot of wood these days. Sometimes when he sleeps, Luo Binghe feels the axe in his hands when he should feel a sword.

Shen Yuan winces. His eyes darts in the direction of the house.

“Wei-shishu took me there,” he lies.

Luo Binghe knows it’s a lie, he is certain of it. Shen Yuan tugs at his sleeves, hiding his hands within, and doesn’t meet either of their eyes. He hunches, just a little. Like he is trying to blend into their surroundings without making it obvious.

Shen Yuan would only lie if he also thought Shen Qingqiu could hear them still; so Luo Binghe goes along with it. For now.

“Shang-shishu said he took Yuan to Wan Jian Peak after,” Luo Binghe says, shifting close enough that they touch, and he smiles when Shen Yuan leans against him, shoulder against shoulder, “but I couldn’t find you there.”

His friend looks at him, eyes wide.

Luo Binghe can see the faint traces of tears on his cheeks. This close, it is impossible to miss how much Shen Yuan’s eyes are still shining with it, as if waiting to overflow at any moment.

He thinks it’s cute that Shen Yuan has no spice tolerance. It’s a selfish thought, but one he can’t deny having.

“Binghe went there as well?” Shen Yuan asks, bewildered and oblivious, “why? You could’ve gotten in trouble!”

“No, I was keeping Da-shixiong busy!” Ning Yingying protests, plucking a blade of grass which grew next to the stairs. It is long and a brilliant shade of green. “And Shizun wasn’t here, either!” She twines the grass between her fingers, eyeing it like it is one of her many silk ribbons.

Luo Binghe wonders if anyone ever taught her how to use it for music. He remembers his mother’s hands, always scrubbed raw but always gentle. How she had helped him position the blade of grass between his hands, and told him to blow.

He leans a little harder against Shen Yuan. His friend supports him easily, letting Luo Binghe rest his head against his shoulder. He might be willing to forget the worries of the day, if he can stay just like this. Shen Yuan smells of grass and something he can’t identify, a flower of some kind.

“I returned before Yuan did,” he points out, resisting the urge to burrow against Shen Yuan’s neck until he can identify that flower, “and Shizun has not punished this one yet.”

“Yet.”

“But Yuan did not come from the direction of Wan Jian Peak either,” Luo Binghe continues, ignoring his friend’s comment, “and these are not the robes you wore this morning.”

“Wha- these are Qing Jing robes!”

“Yours had grass stains on the knees. These are clean.”

Shen Yuan huffs, knocking his head against Luo Binghe’s. It is too gentle to hurt in any kind of way, and only makes Binghe feel warm.

“Fine! Fine. Wei-shishu and I visited Qian Cao Peak. And- and I had to change clothes. Because…”

“Because A-Yuan tripped!”

Shen Yuan’s face turns bright red; when Luo Binghe turns his head to watch, he sees how the flush spreads downwards, past the collar of their uniforms. Shen Yuan’s cheeks remain the reddest of all, bright spots of color even among the red.

He doesn’t deny it.

“Did Yuan get hurt?” Luo Binghe asks, leaning away to look him over. When he had seen Shen Yuan follow Shen Qingqiu into the house, he had not seemed injured. There had been no limping, no visible bruises. Only windswept hair and dread on his face, along with grim determination.

Of course, if his friend visited Qian Cao Peak, then why would he leave it with injuries?

“No,” Shen Yuan says, “this one is *fine*. I only… it’s… it’s *slippery* everywhere, alright? But I’m fine! Physically, anyway,” he adds in a mutter.

Luo Binghe and Ning Yingying exchange a look.

“Physically?” Luo Binghe asks.

“Did A-Yuan qi deviate again?” Ning Yingying wonders.

“I wish,” Shen Yuan mutters, before he yelps. “Binghe!”

“Can’t Yuan just tell us?” he returns, removing his hand from where he pinched his friend’s side, letting the other boy swat at him for it, “and perhaps *not* joke about having qi deviations?”

“As the only one here who has had them, I feel like I'm allowed to make jokes about it,” Shen Yuan protests, and then yelps as they *both* pinch him, performing a perfect pincer maneuver on each side. “Fuck! Fine! Ow, what the hell-”

“Tell us, A-Yuan!”

“It’s not even important!”

“So then Yuan should be able to tell us,” Luo Binghe points out, and smiles at the look of betrayal he receives. Shen Yuan scrunches his nose at him in response, only to sneeze. A tear runs down Shen Yuan’s cheek, and Luo Binghe wipes it away. His friend’s skin is hot to the

touch, a spot of warmth that lingers. Luo Binghe curls his fingers, tucking them against his palm, as if that will let him keep the warmth longer.

Shen Yuan sniffles, then blows his nose again.

“Ugh,” he mumbles, face red, “I wish I could stop leaking. Do we know who told Shizun about *chilis?* We should- we should get revenge. Or maybe steal the jar, bury it somewhere he can’t find it…”

“A-Yuan!” Ning Yingying whines, throwing the grass at him- or attempts to, as it flutters sadly in the air, never reaching its destination. “Don’t avoid the question!”

“Fine! Fine.” Shen Yuan takes a deep breath. “I… received alarming information. Today. That has changed my worldview.”

He pauses.

Luo Binghe wonders what it could be. Did… did Shen Yuan *see* something? But if so, why would he tell them like this? Ning Yingying doesn’t know that he is a seer. Luo Binghe isn’t *supposed* to know.

But if Shen Yuan were to tell them–

Should he not tell Luo Binghe first?

It is a jealous thought, ugly and possessive. Luo Binghe lingers on it nevertheless, wondering if it is so wrong to have it. Shen Yuan knows about the filth in his own blood, the taint which must be the reason his mother found him on the streets. Because Luo Binghe told him about it; a secret which is best forgotten. It is nothing like the power of *sight,* of knowing what may happen. That, he knows, is a far more precious secret, a blessing rather than a curse.

He still hopes Shen Yuan tells him first. Sharing it with Ning Yingying–

“Mu Qingfang is a dual cultivation specialist.”

Luo Binghe blinks.

“... a what?” he says.

Did he hear wrong?

Shen Yuan, already looking miserable, begins to look *wretched.* As if he would like to be buried, to hide away where none may ever look at him, forgetting that Luo Binghe would simply dig him back up if he tries.

“He… Mu-shishu…. Wei-shishu said,” Shen Yuan says, each word stopping and starting, sputtering before it can be finished. Luo Binghe cannot blame him; he is still struggling to understand what he just heard, what Shen Yuan just told them. He can feel his own face grow warm as the words slowly begin to make sense.

“The books are *true!?”* Ning Yingying *squeals,* “the sexy healer is real!? And it’s Mu-shishu! Shishu’s job is to have sex–!”

“Shut up!” Shen Yuan shrieks and tries to slap a hand over her mouth, foiled when she erupts into giggles and falls backwards, off the stairs and out of reach even as he scrambles after her, “shut up! What if Shizun *hears you!?”*

He must have. Luo Binghe is certain the whole mountain heard her. His own ears are still ringing.

“A-Yuan kept saying it was fictional but it was *real!”*

“Your books are not real!” Shen Yuan protests, his voice strangled, “shut up! Leave instead! Leave before we all *die!* Why Shijie hasn’t already, I don’t know!”

“Why would I leave?” Ning Yingying giggles, sitting up, the white of her robes now stained green, and she throws another handful of grass at Shen Yuan, “A-Yuan must tell me more!”

“Shizun was in the village, wasn’t he?” Shen Yuan desperately says, “doesn’t he always bring A-Ying gifts when he returns?”

Ning Yingying’s face lights up.

“Shidi is right!” she exclaims, before she jumps over them, Luo Binghe having to duck his head to avoid getting kicked by accident as she nearly stumbles on the landing, flailing before she regains her balance.

They watch as Ning Yingying’s bright ribbons disappear out of view, followed by the distant sound of her calling out to Shen Qingqiu.

“Shall we go to the tree?” Luo Binghe suggests after a moment.

“Please,” Shen Yuan says with feeling, “before she drags him here.”

Their tree stands tall as always, the branches barren. Leaves have not yet begun to grow, but Luo Binghe knows it will be soon. If he looks, he knows he will find the beginning of buds, tiny little things that will one day fill the crown with lush greenery once more.

But right now, it is barren.

Sometimes when he looks at their tree, Luo Binghe sees double. Like how holding paper against the light will let you see the ink on the other side; except he sees the tree in his dreams, impossibly big and beautiful, with a crown that could shelter from any storm.

It is the only thing he likes about his dreamscape.

Shen Yuan sits down on one of the larger roots, digging the tip of his boots into the softened earth between. Luo Binghe sits opposite of him, and keeps his boots out of the line of fire. Sometimes, he thinks that his friend likes to get dirty out of spite. That there is a catharsis to it, perhaps, to be dirty because he *chose* to.

Most of the time, he knows, Shen Yuan is simply clumsy.

"So…"

"So?" Shen Yuan echoes, looking at him, giving a slight smile.

"What else happened?" Luo Binghe asks, tapping his fingers against the root he sits on, "Yuan visited An Ding, Wan Jian *and* Qian Cao Peak. There must have been more than… that."

"Ah," Shen Yuan says, eyes darting away, "so that is what Binghe wanted. To make me *talk."*

"Yuan doesn't want to?" he asks, digging his nails in between the gnarled bark. "He won't tell me anything at all?"

"I already told Binghe about Mu-shishu!"

"That doesn't count," Luo Binghe replies, shoving the reminder away, because if Shen Yuan knows *that* about Mu Qingfang, then what else did they speak of? Did they discuss dual cultivation? Why? Why would his friend need to know about it? Unless he found someone he wanted to– "I know there's more."

Shen Yuan bites his lip, hesitating.

"... it's not important," he says at last.

"You've been worrying about *'not important'* things for days," Luo Binghe points out, because it is true. His friend has been distant and anxious ever since he ran away from their Shijie. Avoiding touching either of them, barely even spending time on braiding Luo Binghe's hair.

Luo Binghe hadn't dared to push, worried that Shen Yuan would run away if he did. But he had run off anyway; brought back by Shen Qingqiu, yes, but he had left without telling Binghe anything.

It stung.

“That’s not- that’s different. It’s unrelated to what I found out today,” Shen Yuan says, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“Mu-shishu?”

“Fu Yue.”

Luo Binghe straightens.

“Fue Yue?” he repeats, then frowns. “But- if what Yuan found out today was about Fu Yue, then are you still worried about the *‘not important’* thing?”

“Ugh,” Shen Yuan groans, “Binghe is so stubborn!”

“Of course,” he replies, and lets Shen Yuan dig one dirty boot at his own, smearing mud against the side of it, “because I worry.”

“... it’s just. It’s just- that I’m never going to kiss anyone.”

Oh.

Yes, Shen Yuan had mentioned that, hadn’t he? How Ning Yingying had spoken about kissing, and how Luo Binghe for a moment thought he had *lost.* Except he hadn’t lost, for Shen Yuan is no mere trinket to win. He is a person, Luo Binghe’s favorite person in the world.

And he didn’t want to kiss anyone.

“Yuan did say that. I remember,” he carefully replies.

“But I should!” Shen Yuan blurts out, finally looking at him, “I should want to kiss- kiss girls! But I don’t want to kiss anyone- no one at all! That’s weird, right? That I don’t want to kiss or- or marry anyone but- but just to, to stay alone?”

He stumbles on each word, much like back on the stairs. But this is different. Luo Binghe hates the way Shen Yuan’s voice cracks, the way his eyes dart back and forth. He looks ashamed. Guilty, like he has done something wrong, just for not wanting to do anything at all.

Not like Luo Binghe, who wants to do it all.

Greedy, like a true demon.

“My mother was the same,” he says, and Shen Yuan’s eyes snap back to him.

“What?”

Luo Binghe swallows. He realizes his fingers hurt from how hard they dig into the root. He forces himself to let go, to put his hands in his lap.

“When I was very little,” he says, “I asked my mother why she wasn’t married. Because I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and the best mom too,” Luo Binghe says, and it is difficult. He- he hasn’t spoken much about her. Not since he first found her, body still warm, but heart long gone. The guanyin feels heavy around his neck, hidden away under his robes. “Even if our neighbors called her grandma, and even if her hands were always- she was a washer woman, she didn’t… she deserved to have soft hands. But.” Luo Binghe takes a deep breath.

Shen Yuan continues to stare at him, unblinking.

“I didn’t understand why she wouldn’t have a husband, or children that weren’t me. Why was she all alone until she took me in, when she was so kind?” Luo Binghe continues, “but- but when I asked, mother said she had never wanted a spouse, or anyone like that. She hadn’t wanted anyone at all. Not- not until she saw me. Then she just wanted a son.” His voice cracks.

When Shen Yuan reaches out to grab his hand, Luo Binghe lets him. When Shen Yuan squeezes, he squeezes back.

It makes it easier.

“So it’s not weird,” Luo Binghe says, forcing himself to meet Shen Yuan’s eyes, “it just means that Yuan is like my mom.” He manages a smile, and gives his friend’s hand another squeeze. “And that means I never have to share, doesn’t it?”

Shen Yuan swallows.

“Yeah,” he whispers, “yeah, it does.”

They sit like that for a while. Shen Yuan’s hand is warm in his, and this is fine. Luo Binghe thinks that as long as they are together, he doesn’t need anything else.

He is fine with loving Shen Yuan in secret, as long as his friend is happy. As long as Shen Yuan never thinks there is anything wrong with himself, then everything will be fine. Luo Binghe doesn’t need more than that.

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan softly says, “I really am so lucky to have you as my friend.”

“So am I to have you,” Luo Binghe replies.

It is the most honest truth.

Shen Yuan folds those words away.

He imagines they are a handkerchief that he can tuck into his pocket, safe and out of view but there when he needs them. Something to unfold and admire on a rainy day.

Binghe is lucky to have me, he thinks.

I'm lucky to have Binghe.

That's the truth.

"So what was it about Fu Yue?" Binghe asks later that evening, when Shen Yuan is braiding his friend's hair for bed.

The candle light is soft and steady; the floor is cold, and so they sit on Shen Yuan's bed, so that only Binghe will suffer the horrors of walking barefoot on ice cold floors.

"Hm? Fu Yue?" he mumbles in return, for a moment too focused on gathering it all into one braid.

It would be easier for his hands to make pigtails, but, well. He can't do *that.* Not to Binghe.

"Didn't Yuan find out something?"

"Oh! Yeah," Shen Yuan huffs, "I found out that Wei-shishu is keeping *secrets.* About *my* sword! Can Binghe believe it?"

"Secrets?" his friend asks, confused.

Shen Yuan has to poke his cheek to make him look forward again.

"Secrets," he nods, once Binghe sits properly again, "apparently Wei-shishu found something about Fu Yue. But he won't tell me what it is." It made sense once it had been explained to him, he knew that, but it was still *ugh.* So fucking frustrating!

"Why wouldn't he?" Binghe asks, because Binghe is a good friend, who only pressures Shen Yuan into talking about feelings *sometimes.*

This? Much easier.

“He says I’m too young,” Shen Yuan says with disgust, “that I have to be *patient.* Oh! And apparently Fu Yue can return whenever it wants to! Why hasn’t it yet? I think I’ve been patient! Also, done,” he adds, letting go of the braid.

Luo Binghe immediately turns to face him, an awkward shuffle that bunches up the blanket around them. That is fine; it gives Shen Yuan something to focus on. Something that isn’t how Binghe’s eyes shine like golden obsidian when the candle light reflects in his eyes, or how he looks like a very cute puppy, tilting his head like that.

“You have been very patient,” Binghe agrees, looking offended on his behalf, and then thoughtful. “Does… does Yuan think maybe… *he* would know anything?”

“He? Who is- oh!” Shen Yuan considers it.

Would Meng Mo know anything about Fu Yue? It wasn’t that impossible, was it? The dream demon was ancient, even for a demon, and dreams held secrets long after the living died out. There was a chance. Binghe could ask that very night, and then Shen Yuan wouldn’t have to wait for what could be *years* before he found out what Wei Qingwei knew.

But.

“Could… I be the one to ask him?” he wonders.

Binghe wrinkles his nose.

“Yuan-”

“Please?” he begs, leaning forward, hands on Binghe’s knees as he does, “just for a little while! And if he does anything, I know Binghe will kick his ass, right?”

“I would *try,”* his friend hisses back, glancing furtively towards their door. Not that Shen Qingqiu is there; off on his damn patrol again, paranoid asshole. Maybe even stocking up on more chilis. Because he’s *evil.* “Do you really *have* to? He is rude, and not worth Yuan’s time.”

“Well, I don’t *have* to,” Shen Yuan admits, “I just want to. Come on! When will I get to speak with one of- of *them* again? Binghe doesn’t count, we’ve been over this,” he adds when Binghe opens his mouth, “please? Just for a little while, just so I can ask about Fu Yue.”

Binghe looks torn; cheeks just a little bit pink as he looks down, to where Shen Yuan’s hands are resting. It makes his hands feel warm and itchy, like maybe he should move them away, except he can’t make himself do that.

“... I don’t…”

“I’ll tickle you.”

Binghe laughs, surprised.

“Tickle me?”

“I’ll tickle you until you cry,” Shen Yuan threatens, “don’t think I won’t!”

It only makes Binghe laugh harder; his whole body shakes with it, one hand pressing against his mouth to muffle the sound. It is of little help; Shen Yuan can hear each little giggle clear as day, the vibrations moving through his hands, letting him *feel* each and every laugh. It makes his insides feel absolutely cringe, like butterflies and warmth and everything he ever read about. It makes him want to do it; to tickle Binghe until he cries, just to get more of it.

“Fine,” his friend says right before Shen Yuan is about to give in like a lunatic, “I’ll try to let Yuan join tonight.”

“Just *try?”*

“I don’t know how I did it the first time!”

Well, that’s fair.

“Alright,” Shen Yuan says, leaning away, “if Binghe promises.”

Binghe huffs another laugh.

“I promise.”

They smile at each other, cheeks pink. Shen Yuan ignores how warm his hands feel, and instead pokes Binghe back to his own bed.

Shen Yuan opens his eyes to *green.*

He looks up at it; green upon green, saturated with sun. Every leaf has a yellow edge to it because of it, as if the sun is peeking through each of them. Shen Yuan drinks it all in, feeling warm and lazy, resting against their tree. When he turns his head, Binghe sits next to him, dark eyes glittering like water in summer. Shen Yuan smiles back at him, and then looks up to the canopy above once more.

Shen Yuan blinks.

“Wait,” he says, staring at all that green, “it’s not summer.”

Binghe laughs next to him.

“Oh!” Shen Yuan gasps, and sits up properly, looking around. And it’s as he suspected; there are no mountains around them. Not a single bamboo in sight, nor any worn down stairs or the sound of windchimes. There is only a wasteland of red sand and deep, endless cracks in the earth, as far as the eye can see. A desolate, impossible place.

He turns to Binghe, excited.

“I’m in your dream!” he exclaims.

“Yes,” Binghe replies, grinning, “welcome back?”

Shen Yuan laughs, standing up to look around. It’s one of those moments where he abruptly remembers this is meant to be a story, a book. He is in a *dream.* He is in Binghe’s dream!

Speaking of-

“Where is Meng Mo?” he asks, “did Binghe not tell him I was visiting?”

Binghe’s smile drops into a scowl; his eyes flick to the side. When Shen Yuan follows, he sees–

He squints.

Leans closer to Binghe.

“Why is he an angry cloud?” he whispers.

“So this must be the little cultivator!” Meng Mo’s voice booms from the angry looking cloud. Though perhaps ‘angry cloud’ is too much of a compliment. It is more like someone grabbed a handful of steel wool and squeezed it into something vaguely cloud-shaped that could also move by itself.

It’s like someone animated it with the bare minimum frames. It is like the shittiest CGI budget, and it’s waiting to be roasted on the forums. Shen Yuan wonders if it always looked like that; he never did get to see Meng Mo’s form in that first dream. Only heard his voice, all around them and ominous.

It’s a bit of a let down! He won’t lie!

“He can’t take proper form because he’s too weak,” Binghe says, not even attempting to whisper.

The angry CGI-cloud named Meng Mo bristles angrily.

“Brat! Show proper respect! I do not need a *face* to show you my power!”

“This one greets- um- the elder?” Shen Yuan tries, stepping forward, pushing Binghe’s arm away when the other boy tries to stop him, “I’m honored to meet the famous Meng Mo.”

The angry cloud puffs up.

“See? This is the respect one should give their elders,” Meng Mo scolds, “to think the little cultivator shows more sense than one of demonic blood! Speaking of, I have heard that you agree that demons are superior. Does the little cultivator plan to learn demonic cultivation? If he continues to show such respect, perhaps this wise one will take him under his tutelage as well.”

Shen Yuan stares.

“Um.”

“He is *not* going to do that,” Binghe protests, and this time Shen Yuan lets him step in front, too busy trying to find a response to all of *that,* “and Yuan doesn’t think demons are *superior,* he just- just thinks demons are… *fascinating.”*

Okay, so maybe Binghe’s whole anti-demon thing still needs some work.

“Don’t say it like I’m crazy for it,” Shen Yuan complains, “there is nothing wrong with appreciating cultural differences! This one apologies, though, for- for having to decline the offer. This disciple is already dedicated to the current cultivation path.”

“Hmpf. Young ones these days,” Meng Mo mutters, bristling. He keeps doing that somehow. There is no other way to describe it than bristling, but how it works is a mystery.

Shen Yuan really can’t look at the cloud for too long. He might laugh, and what then? Who knows what Meng Mo would do! Shen Yuan likes having his brain *not* fried, thanks. He must remember that the man is an elder demon, one of the most powerful dream demons to ever exist.

It helps keep the nervous laughter at bay, anyway.

“Did Binghe say why this one was visiting?” he asks, taking hold of Binghe’s wrist to tug him back, just a bit. It is a poor attempt to try and make his friend look less like a furious little guard dog. “If the honored Elder would allow this one the time to ask a question…?”

“Ah, yes. The brat mentioned that you were curious about some sword?”

Is it really so hard to use Binghe’s name?

“Among other things, yes. This one would be deeply grateful to receive any answers which the honored elder can give him!”

“Wait, among other things?” Binghe turns to look at him, suspicious, “What other questions would Yuan ask?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Binghe looks like he would like to worry about it. Shen Yuan decides to ignore him. It’s fine! What harm can some *educational* questions do?

“This elder knows of many things; speak, and we shall see what this sword of yours might be.”

“Its name is Fu Yue. It… it has a black hilt, with moon symbols on it. Shishu said it was very old, but did not specify the age, so this one cannot give you a timeline. Ah, the pomme is in the shape of a full moon?”

Meng Mo makes a thoughtful sound. They both stand there, staring up at him, waiting as he makes more grumbling sounds, half-mutterings too low for them to hear.

“Brat,” Meng Mo then says, and Shen Yuan can’t explain *how* he knows it, but he knows the old demon turns towards Binghe despite the lack of face, “you have seen it. Shape it in this dream; show me what it looks like. Prove that you have learned something, and show the might of dream magic to your friend. Perhaps then he will reconsider rejecting my generous offer.”

!!!

Shen Yuan whips his head around to Binghe, excited.

Binghe’s eyes briefly meet his; the frown on his friend’s face is quickly replaced with determination. As Shen Yuan watches, Binghe focuses. He holds out his hands as if grasping at something unseen, willing the air to turn solid, before he positions himself in a pose which Shen Yuan knows well. It is the one they often begin practice with, the one Binghe is always praised for performing perfectly.

It is like the shadows between Binghe’s hands take solid form. Shifting until there is a sword hilt, black as night, and then it continues. He imagines it is like watching an invisible brush shaping lines of ink, too dark around the edges before they shiver into something more tangible.

Fu Yue appears, like art made into reality. For a moment it shines like it did when Shen Yuan first pulled it from that pond, and he can’t help the gasp that escapes him. Before he knows it, he is stepping closer, reaching out.

Binghe doesn’t hesitate to hand it to him.

Shen Yuan’s hands shake as he accepts it. The weight feels solid and real. He traces the moons in its hilt, feels how smooth they are in comparison to the rest of it. Shen Yuan swallows, before he holds it the way one is supposed to. It feels right and wrong, all at once. Physically it’s perfect. But–

It’s not real, of course. Shen Yuan can’t feel the soft tugging of music when he touches it, no hint of silver and gentle understanding. As real as the sword feels in his hands, it’s not Fu Yue itself. There is no soul to reach out to.

He knew that. So why is he so disappointed?

“Well?” Meng Mo demands, making him jump, “is it a good copy?”

“It’s perfect,” Shen Yuan says, admiring it one final time before he forces himself to hold it out for display, showing off the rounded pommel, how Fu Yue’s name is written like flowing water upon its blade.

Even the sword tassel feels real, he thinks, as it rests against his wrist. It tickles.

Meng Mo moves closer, enough that Shen Yuan could touch him if he wanted to. Which he kind of does? There’s a morbid fascination to it, to see how solid this dark cloud might be, even if it’s just a dream. Would it feel like actual steel wool, harsh to the touch? Or would it be like touching smoke, formless?

Shen Yuan doesn’t touch, because that would be rude. He waits instead; holding still as Meng Mo hovers before him.

Silence.

It drags out; the anticipation is soon unraveled into an awkward noodle of a thing, and Shen Yuan has to bite back his impatience.

Binghe has no such qualms.

“For all your claims, it seems you cannot help,” he says, crossing his arms, “so there are things the famous Meng Mo *doesn’t* know. Yuan, I think it is time we wake up.”

“What? No! Binghe, even if he can’t tell us about Fu Yue, I have *so* many other questions–!”

“Impudent brat,” Meng Mo cuts in with a deep rumble, “respect your elders! I recognize the sword, but its origin? That I cannot recall. All I know is that I saw it right before I lost my earthly form, so it is indeed ancient. The wielder cautioned me to wait longer before facing my tribulation.” His voice turns grudging, as he adds, “perhaps this elder should have listened.”

Shen Yuan perks up.

“Can you remember who wielded it?” he asks eagerly, looking back down at the blade. The sun-dappled shadows dance across it, making it appear like liquid, and he tightens his grip on it, “if this one knew the name of even one, perhaps I could find out more in the library.”

“Hmm. This elder did not know their name, but there is one thing I am certain of.”

Shen Yuan holds his breath.

“It was a woman.”

Shen Yuan has the sudden urge to stab a cloud.

“That’s it?” Binghe asks, incredulous, “that is all that can be remembered?”

“A very beautiful woman,” Meng Mo adds, and Shen Yuan looks down at the fake sword, in this fake world, and wonders how much damage *he* can do in a dream that isn’t his, to a

demon who can master any dream he resides in, “a splendid beauty! Even for a human, she was a sight to behold, with a bountiful bosom. Shame that it was so long ago. If you must refuse a demon wife, then she would have been a good enough candidate instead.”

“Maybe I can ask my questions another time,” Shen Yuan says, shoving the sword towards Binghe. His friend accepts it. He looks as offended as Shen Yuan feels. Or almost; there’s something burning hot inside of him, at the very core. It feels like a qi deviation put in a slow cooker. Simmering.

It’s not that there’s anything wrong with women wielding swords, obviously. Ning Yingying has better form than he does. It’s just-

That’s it? *Really?*

What happened to the wise, portable grandpa? The dream demon who knew a little about everything? Who- who–

Who had always been a pervert, and always encouraged Luo Binghe in his pursuits of papapa.

Once again, Shen Yuan doesn’t know why he is so disappointed. He should have *known.*

“Don’t despair,” Meng Mo harrumphs, “a person’s attire says more than younglings like you could ever know, and a woman’s even more so. I will show you.”

Something brushes against Shen Yuan’s fingers.

Confused, he looks down, only to freeze. Where he once was dressed in the green of Qing Jing, now all he sees is black. Long, black robes that touch the ground they stand on, with only the very tip of his fingers visible past the sleeves. There are fish of silver thread, he vaguely notes, swimming along what can only be the hems of a *woman’s* robes, for the cut reminds him not of a cultivator’s but of a noble lady’s and–

– he gasps up at the ceiling, that simmering hot anger now not simmering anymore. He feels it spreading rapidly, like knocked down dominoes bursting into fireworks, crackling within his meridians and it’s so dark and he can’t see what he’s wearing, even when he sits up.

It feels like he is choking on his own heartbeat as he throws a hand out, willing the candle to light itself, and instead his hands grow impossibly warm and he can’t *breathe.*

Someone is holding his hands. He grasps at them like a lifeline, clutching at them as he tastes blood, and past the roaring in his ears he hears, “Binghe is here.”

Binghe is here, he thinks, which means- which means he isn’t *there,* because Binghe was never, ever there and… and…

Shen Yuan’s chest hurts as he finally breathes, a great heaving mouthful of *air,* Binghe’s hands for once feeling cold in comparison to his own. He feels like he is choking even as he

breathes, and Shen Yuan hides his face against Binghe's shoulder, shuddering.

He doesn't know for how long they stay like that.

Concept of time is such a fickle thing, when experiencing a qi deviation. Or… did he? He doesn't know. His brain is suddenly so tired, his body heavy with fatigue. Even as his heart calms, Shen Yuan can't do much more than breathe against Binghe's shoulder.

Stupid. What a stupid reaction to something so *silly.*

"I'm fine," he mumbles.

"You're not," Binghe replies, voice wobbling at the edges, "you almost…"

"Nothing exploded," he points out, which is. Good. Better than the past, and he has just enough energy to feel almost proud of it.

Maybe Shen Qingqiu didn't hear.

Binghe makes a choked noise, and squeezes Shen Yuan's hands. It is only then that he realizes they feel *wet.* Sticky and warm at the tip of his fingers. Shen Yuan tilts his face down, and it is dark, so dark in their unlit room, in the shadows cradled between their bodies.

The moon shines just right for him to see anyway.

Shen Yuan lurches away, snatching his hands out of Binghe's. His friend hisses, because Binghe's hands are *bleeding* from where Shen Yuan's nails dug in. In the dark, it could be mistaken for ink smeared across Binghe's hands, if not for the crescent moons left behind.

"You're bleeding," he says.

"It's fine," Binghe replies, reaching for him.

"It's not fine!" Shen Yuan hisses back, keeping his hands away, "I- I hurt you, just because of… of a silly *dream."*

Because of an old angry cloud, but he can't say that. If there is any hope of Shen Qingqiu not being awake and listening, mentioning demons of any kind would surely snap the man awake. And even then, it's still silly. Who reacts like that to some stupid robes?

"I'm going to… to heal you," Shen Yuan mumbles, clasping his hands together, willing them to stop trembling, "I just- just need to, to calm down a bit. It's fine. I'll fix it."

"I'm *fine,* Yuan. I can handle some scratches," Binghe insists, as if Shen Yuan didn't fucking *gouge him.* He totally doesn't flinch as Binghe then cradles his hands, he's just feeling twitchy, that's all! "I'm not the one who nearly…" Binghe releases a shuddering breath. "Should I get Shizun?" he asks, and that, out of everything, is almost too much.

He must have scared him real bad, if Binghe wants to call for Shen Qingqiu.

“He would kill us both if we woke him now,” he replies, the taste of guilt nearly overpowering, “I would rather live.”

“But what if Yuan’s meridians… would it not be better to ask Shizun to look? Can’t qi deviations continue in more subtle ways?”

“Binghe can do it for now,” Shen Yuan says, “can’t you?”

His friend’s hands squeeze around his; for a moment, it is almost as if Shen Yuan isn’t trembling at all. He looks down at them, how his clasped hands are cradled between Binghe’s, and it’s not the dream this time that makes Shen Yuan’s heart go *thud-thud.*

Stupid, he thinks, and lets himself fall forwards into Binghe. To hide his face, of course. He can’t let his best friend see whatever face he’s making. It’s probably a cringe one.

And like this, he can see Binghe’s hands, how he hesitates before he adjusts his grip, moving until he is holding Shen Yuan’s wrists instead. There is the very soft glow of qi as his friend begins to examine his meridians.

It’s warm. The almost-too-warm touch of laying in the sun for a moment too long, but so soft that it feels like a summer breeze. It’s a little rough because Binghe isn’t used to it. Sometimes, that summer breeze stutters before it continues. But it’s nice.

Just the feel of it makes it a little easier to breathe again.

By the time Binghe has finished, Shen Yuan has melted against him. Adrenaline? Gone. Brain cells? Goopy. There is nothing but nice, warm Binghe and the sound of their breathing, in an otherwise silent room. At some point, Binghe’s arms wrapped around him. He can see the moon outside. Like this, he can pretend he didn’t almost explode. It’s nice.

Shen Yuan closes his eyes.

“Thank you,” he mumbles into the quiet.

“Yuan will get Fu Yue back,” Binghe whispers back as he hugs him tighter, “don’t worry so much, please. Not if it hurts you.”

Don’t ask to meet Meng Mo again, goes unsaid. Shen Yuan still hears it clear as day.

“Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back.”

“What?”

“How will I find things if I don’t go looking?” Shen Yuan says.

Binghe huffs, and Shen Yuan should probably not find that cute. He does, though. He finds it terribly cute, and despite everything that just happened, despite the whole… *thing* he decided on, with his role in this story, by Binghe’s side- he still has to bite back a laugh.

“But I will try to be more careful,” he promises, moving his hands to hug Binghe back. All he gets back is a sigh. That’s fine.

Shen Yuan means it, and he will prove it.

Somehow.

“... Yuan?”

Shen Yuan burrows closer.

“Did you fall asleep?”

“No,” Shen Yuan mumbles. He thinks they are laying down. They shouldn’t do that. There’s a reason, he knows, that they sleep in different beds now. But it’s nice, so he doesn’t care.

He has almost begun to fall back asleep when Binghe speaks again. The words are soft, hesitant and barely a whisper.

“What made you scared?” Binghe asks.

Shen Yuan wants to ignore it. Surely Binghe would understand, if he was too tired to respond? Too sleepy to talk?

“It was stupid,” he finds himself saying instead, clutching at the back of Binghe’s clothes, “it’s fine. Binghe shouldn’t worry. It was silly, anyway.”

“But-”

“I’m tired.”

Please.

Silence. A long kind of silence that makes his heart beat faster. His throat feels tight, like a snare has been caught.

“The floor is cold,” Binghe finally whispers, “can I stay here?”

Shen Yuan nods, wordless.

“Thank you,” Binghe says, as if Shen Yuan is helping *him.* As if Shen Yuan isn’t the one clinging like an idiot, as if he wasn’t the one who insisted on meeting Meng Mo and then couldn’t even take it.

He sniffles, and hugs tighter.

Binghe lets him.

Chapter End Notes

Big Red Button:
MM: oh, what's this? *presses*
SY: *implodes*

Surprise! Not a monday update!
I'm going to be away from home for a few days, so that is why. Hope you don't mind <3 it also means the next chapter will be late (are we surprised at this point) but hopefully not by much!!!

Also let's congratulate Meng Mo on accidentally finding SY's biggest trigger that no one knew about, oops!!! that's TALENT.
Perhaps we should also congratulate SY and LBH on friendzoning each other, too. Good job guys <3

Fanart time!

Theimpurelily is amazing and made a whole video of beautiful art and fitting music. That's right, a music animatic!!! AHHH!!! Go give Lily some love, I've watched it on repeat for a totally normal about of times.

raindeathlily drew SY the fashion show! This link leads to Shen Yuan in An Ding robes, but Raindeathlily linked to all of them in it as well. Check them all out pls!

I somehow missed the art which findmybonesintheocean made! Very gorgeous use of colors <3

Last but not least! artsarasp drew the talisman peaklord, Wan Qingwhoever! Behold him (and SQH being thirsty in the background)

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three years ago, his house had been quiet.

None entered without permission, for none dared to defy a Peak Lord for fear of punishment. There had only been the sound of windchimes to accompany him in the mornings.

A serene silence that Shen Qingqiu had not experienced anywhere else, for the world was filled with idiots that would not keep their foul mouths shut. The bamboo house was a privilege, one that he would clutch in an iron grasp. Silence is rare, and Shen Qingqiu knew well how easy it is to let rare things slip by.

Three years ago, he picked out two strays. Filthy little creatures that did not deign to thank the hand that fed them. Instead they caused a ruckus wherever they went, a fumbling idiot and his mongrel of a *friend.*

Shen Qingqiu presses a finger against the sword on his desk. Nail catching in the grooves where moon-shaped gems are fitted into the hilt. He feels nothing at the touch. It may as well be a dead sword, the kind bandits use when roaming about the countryside. It is not like Xiu Ya, whose hilt is pristine white, the design clean with lines of shimmering silver. Xiu Ya, whose presence cannot be denied, for it is tied to his very core. The one thing in the world whose intent always follows his own.

If the brat deserved to carry his sword, the blade would have gone already. That was what the buffoon had claimed, with that infuriating smile. If the sword deigns to play dead rather than return to its master's side, who is Shen Qingqiu to return it? There is no need, no desire to. It is not like the child needs it, contained to the peak as he is.

The children are bickering.

He can hear them through the walls. There is no need to heighten his senses; the fools are loud enough without it, forgetting once more that he can kick them out whenever he pleases.

"–bad is it?" whines the boy.

"It will pass," the mongrel replies, and Shen Qingqiu looks towards the window. The sun has begun to rise, the sky more blue than it is morning-gray. They are going to be late, and they don't know it.

Too busy whinging like spoiled brats.

"You're laughing!"

"No! No, this humble *one is not laughing at Shixiong-"* a yelp, the sound of a kick. Shen Qingqiu grits his teeth, a dull throbbing at the back of his head. It crawls down towards his

nape, lingers where his jaw is locked. A pressure which he has grown used to. He stands and grabs the child's sword. Tucks it in against Xiu Ya, whose touch feels like the sharp sparkle of snow in sunlight. Alive and his own.

"Binghe was!"

"Not at *Yuan, it's only, um–"*

"Silence!" Shen Qingqiu snaps, and there is the *gratifying* sound of someone falling over, a thud and a squeak. "If you cretins have enough time to *bicker,* you have enough time to begin your morning duties."

For once, the brats obey.

They exit the room in a careful shuffle; Luo Binghe at the front, Shen Yuan behind him. He is very obviously hiding his face, staring at his own dragging feet as they both attempt to walk past Shen Qingqiu. The mongrel offers a bow but does not stop walking, making it obvious just how not sincere the show of respect actually is.

The child does not even offer a pretense at it, too busy hiding his face. As if Shen Qingqiu could possibly be unaware of anything that happens in his own house, as if he would not yank the brat up by the hair to ensure nothing was kept from him. As if the boy is *ignorant* of such.

As if Shen Qingqiu cannot see the dried blood under his nails.

Shen Qingqiu steps in front of them, forcing the shuffling to an abrupt halt. The little beast freezes in his tracks, which in turn makes the boy walk right into him. Shen Qingqiu watches as Shen Yuan rears back, head jerking upwards. He catches a glimpse of eyes so red and swollen it is a miracle the boy can see at all, before Shen Yuan slaps his blood-stained hands over them.

Shen Qingqiu allows a moment; the boy does not drop his hands, and the mongrel is frozen where he stands. Stuck where they are, for both have just enough sense to know better than to run. They look ridiculous.

He lets the silence drag on.

"Disciple Luo," Shen Qingqiu says at last, "hands."

The tension in the little beast's body grows more pronounced. But he does as told, holding his hands out, palms down. Even as Shen Qingqiu pulls out his fan, the boy does not falter, does not try to tuck his hands out of harm's way. Good. He must have experienced this kind of punishment before, and knows to not avoid it.

"Stay still," Shen Qingqiu orders.

"Wait!" Shen Yuan yelps, taking the bait, just as he knew the brat would. The boy drops his hands and lurches forward. Shen Qingqiu smacks his hands away with the fan, a *thwack* that has Shen Yuan yelping like a dog.

Shen Qingqiu flips Luo Binghe's hands over to reveal his palms.

Red crescent moons are spread in an uneven line. They are positioned in such a way that they cannot have been self-made. There is still dried blood, because the children do not have access to water in their room, and could not have spared the time to hide the evidence- or perhaps they had been just civilized enough to avoid licking it away like animals. Shen Qingqiu presses down at the edge of the reddened skin, just to make the beast's fingers twitch, to hear the hitching breath of withheld pain.

He scoffs and lets go. Before Shen Yuan can back away, he grabs the boy's wrist and yanks him close, holding up the boy's hand to show off the dirty nails. It is obvious who injured the beast.

"Would Disciple Shen like to explain?" he says.

Shen Yuan attempts to tug free. Shen Qingqiu squeezes. He can feel the boy's pulse. It flutters like bird wings against his hand, quick and off-beat. When he squeezes, it beats faster. The boy stills.

"... explain what, Shizun?" Shen Yuan asks through gritted teeth.

"Disciple Luo is injured," Shen Qingqiu replies. Shame and guilt twists the boy's face. "And yet Disciple Shen has not *meddled* as he often does. No healing has been done. How *strange."*

Shen Qingqiu lets go of the wrist.

Shen Yuan yanks it close to his chest, rubbing at it, fearing it will bruise. The mongrel steps closer, hovering with the delusion that he will be of any use. If Shen Qingqiu decided to hurt either of them, neither of them could do anything to stop it. No one would help them, even if they could.

He snaps the fan open and raises it to his face.

"Why has Disciple Shen decided to not heal his fellow disciple?" he coolly asks.

He knows why, of course.

The little fool had a qi deviation in the night. Even an idiot knows better than to attempt to heal another after such a thing; even *this* idiot who stares up at him, eyes puffy and red, looking like bees stung him with a vengeance. Except he did not, for Shen Qingqiu had heard through the walls how the mongrel had to convince him of how idiotic it was.

Behind the fan, Shen Qingqiu sneers.

"Disciple Luo," he says when Shen Yuan remains silent, "explain."

The beast hesitates.

"Binghe doesn't have to-" Shen Yuan begins.

"Silence."

Shen Qingqiu stares him down until the boy averts his glare, cheeks matching the red gathered around his eyes.

"Whether Disciple Luo answers or not, it does not matter," Shen Qingqiu says once it becomes clear that the brats are keeping their mouths shut, as they should, "I am already aware of the reason. Did you two truly believe you could fool this master, in *my* house?" He snaps the fan shut and points to the table. "Disciple Shen, sit. Disciple Luo, make yourself useful. Prepare tea."

They gape at him. Shen Qingqiu narrows his eyes.

"Are you cultivators or village fools?" he demands, "shut your mouths, before I shut them for you. This master gave an order. Have you grown deaf as well as stupid? *Move."*

They scramble. Shen Qingqiu watches them, unimpressed, until only Shen Yuan is left in the room, kneeling by the table. The boy glances up at him, then looks away, shifty like a thief who has been caught. There is the sound of dishes being moved coming from the kitchen. Faint, indicating that the beast is taking *some* care with his master's belongings.

Shen Qingqiu sits behind Shen Yuan.

The boy twitches. Makes to turn around, only to squawk when Shen Qingqiu jabs him in the side with the fan.

"Eyes forward," he orders, "this master is going to repair the damage your foolish behavior has caused."

"Yes, Shizun," Shen Yuan replies, with a severe lack of respect.

Shen Qingqiu does not jab him again, though the brat would deserve it. He puts his hands on either side of a bony spine- has he not eaten the food which the peak offers? Does he not know how *spoiled* he is, to even have the option of foregoing it? -and begins what has become an evening routine, but has now been moved to the morning.

There is strain; this, Shen Qingqiu expected. But beyond that, he cannot detect any other abnormalities. The spiritual pathways have not become tangled, the meridians are not close to bursting. So unlike Shen Qingqiu's own. It is not a jagged mess of tangled thorns; there is a proper cultivation base supporting the foundations, the teachings of Shen Qingqiu's peak holding up what should be crumbling.

Instead there is only *strain,* a rope bridge that is stretched too far. It would still be an easy thing to make it snap.

It would only take a *nudge.*

Shen Qingqiu stops. Pulls away.

"What caused this?" he asks.

The boy hunches. The sounds from the kitchen halts, briefly, a lull of eavesdropping. Shen Qingqiu leans in.

“Don’t test my patience,” he hisses, the boy flinching, “what caused it, disciple *Shen?* Shall this master guess?”

It would not be difficult. Last time Shen Qingqiu saw someone with such puffy eyes was when Ning Yingying was still a small child, new to the sect. She had cried for hours when he left the peak to fulfill his duties. None had managed to console her. It had taken far too long to soothe the swelling, pressing cold cloth over her eyes as he had brushed her hair with the new comb he had gotten during his excursion.

Shen Yuan is not a little girl, nor has he recently lost anyone close to him. He is a spoiled brat, whose healing has shown steady progress. There is no reason for him to bawl like a child in need of comfort, in the safety of a peak lord’s house.

Of course, the only question is what made a brat of fifteen years cry hard enough to show the next day. Shen Yuan was growing older; to cry like a child is shameful, to show the signs of it is an insult to Shen Qingqiu himself. It is unflattering. *He* has never cried like that.

Was this not the reason that he had allowed the mongrel to remain in the house? To ensure that Shen Yuan did not cause a mess, of himself or the house which Shen Qingqiu allowed him to reside in?

“Just,” Shen Yuan mumbles, “just a- a bad dream. That’s all.”

“Bad dreams do not come from nothing,” Shen Qingqiu replies, “if you wish to leave the house today, be forthright.”

“Shizun is going to *lock me in?”*

“Trust is rewarded. Secrecy is not.”

Shen Yuan makes a sound; it can’t be anything but a scoff. The boy has the sense to realize he should not have done it, to understand that small sound was a mistake that will cost him dearly.

“Disciple Shen disagrees?” Shen Qingqiu coolly asks.

“... I’m…”

“Of course you do,” he cuts off before the child can speak, standing up in a sweeping motion. The boy flinches away, head whipping around. Shen Qingqiu does not look at him. “Disciple Shen struggles to perform the simple task of being *obedient.* ”

“That’s not fair,” Shen Yuan blurts out, flying to his feet in an ungraceful scramble, “when has Shizun *ever* rewarded this one? All I receive is- are *punishments–!”*

“If Disciple Shen *deigned* to be obedient and *earn* trust, then perhaps he would be rewarded,” Shen Qingqiu returns, resting his hand against Xiu Ya, fingers brushing against the brat’s

sword. Immediately the other's eyes go there, staring greedily. Shen Qingqiu flicks his sleeve, hiding both swords from sight.

Shen Yuan's eyes narrow into a furious glare. He balls up his sleeves, fists trembling, wrinkling the fabric.

Behind him, Luo Binghe hovers in the kitchen's doorway, holding a tray of teacups. Steam wafts from the teapot, from the teacups themselves. Luo Binghe does not speak, but Shen Qingqiu finds the look on his face disagreeable. A mongrel who considers himself a guard dog, and not a shabby little thing that picks at scraps. Once again, the boy seems mistaken in his ability to stop Shen Qingqiu from doing anything he wants.

At most, Luo Binghe would only manage to break two teacups.

Shen Qingqiu turns his eyes back to the brat. Shen Yuan continues to tremble with anger, bottling it up, for that is what the brat always does when he cannot get his way. Too weak to grasp at what he wants, to take back what is his.

Fu Yue hangs from Shen Qingqiu's waist, lifeless and dull. Shen Yuan does not curl his fingers into sword signs. He doesn't call for it, the way that Wei Qingwei claims he can.

He only stands there, wrinkling the fabric of his sleeves, eyes swollen from tears. *Choosing* to be helpless.

A disgrace.

Would he speak the truth, if Shen Qingqiu took one of those teacups and poured it over his head? Would it force that bottled anger into the open, instead of festering deep inside of him? Shen Qingqiu knows well what causes qi deviations.

The tea looks hot enough to burn.

"Leave," he says, "now."

Shen Yuan is quick to obey, a furious whirl of robes as he rushes outside. The door is left open behind him. It allows Luo Binghe the time to put down the tray on Shen Qingqiu's desk, to bow before he rushes after the brat, sparing only a moment to close the door behind him.

Shen Qingqiu remains where he is, his head filled with the buzzing of bees, his veins too thin and too big for his body.

The mongrel had only prepared two cups.

He stands there, watching the tea grow cold.

After chores, lessons and a very rushed dinner with Ning Yingying showing off her new arm bracers- silver, with flowers and birds engraved into them alongside little gems- they end up in the library. Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan, that is, because Ning Yingying took one look at the pile of books and ran off before they could say anything.

The librarians had sighed with relief.

There are not that many people in the library. It's late, right before the last dinner of the day. Most are on their way there, or doing other research that requires more privacy or practical things. Whoever else remains is quiet and hidden away between the many alcoves, too busy with their own research to mind the presence of two boys in the very corner of it.

Shen Yuan is fairly certain that each peak has its own library; each one specialized in something, after all. It would be stupid if they didn't keep their own writing within easy access. Cultivation was all about learning, and it would waste too much time to send disciples running all the way over to Qing Jing Peak to fetch one little book whenever a disciple needed to learn something not covered in their lessons.

(He had seen Qian Cao Peak's library, but never stepped inside it. The building had been humble in comparison to Qing Jing Peak's. Mu Qingfang said there were lower levels, underground, since healing was one of the oldest crafts in the world. That it was bigger than it looked.)

But Shen Yuan knew that Qing Jing Peak was considered to be the most extensive one, with the most varied subjects to be found within its depths. Everything that could be safely shuffled off, the things that were rarely needed, was sent to their library. Hell, there was a whole section that Shen Yuan was pretty sure was dedicated to writings from Bai Zhan Peak.

Once again, he wondered if they really *did* teach their disciples to read. His 'fairly certain' theory on each peak having its own library was only in danger of being wrong due to Bai Zhan Peak. He was *not* certain they had one.

Still, Qing Jing Peak had its own specialization. The four arts, of course. Strategy and art, music and history.

Keyword: History.

Meng Mo had not been very helpful, but he had still given them a few clues. Together with what Wei Qingwei had told Shen Yuan, it helped paint a slightly better picture. Instead of a blank paper, they now had two squiggly lines.

Fu Yue was old, and its history had been recorded at Cang Qiong Mountain for a long time. Possibly since it was made, if the sword had been made at their sect. There had been several different wielders of Fu Yue.

The woman whose robes Shen Yuan had– the robes- they were black. Qiong Ding Peak was known for black robes, and her clothes had been intricate with silver thread. It implied she was a master, maybe even a peak lord, if they were lucky. Every peak lord was recorded for *sure.*

Meng Mo had fucked up his tribulation about six hundred years ago; Binghe had to needle him for *that* answer, but it gave them a timeline.

So!

A female cultivator from Qiong Ding Peak, six hundred years ago. That should have narrowed it down.

Should have.

"How *old* is this sect!?" he groans, slamming his head against the table. Or he would have, if Binghe hadn't put a hand between him and the hard wooden surface. "And why did they decide to have a *fifty year old war right then where everyone kept dying!?"*

Binghe shushes him. Shen Yuan turns his head to glare at him.

"I'm whisper-shouting," he hisses.

"You're really not," Binghe wryly replies, "though I agree with you." Binghe frowns at the book *he* is reading. It's one about outstanding women in history; very suitable for a guy who will grow up to have a harem of wives, most of which can hold their own. Like Liu Mingyan. She probably has a future section, doesn't she? Especially since Binghe won't burn down the sect. Not when Shen Yuan is still in it. Yeah.

Shen Yuan is fine.

"Apparently there were three generations where there were only female peak lords," Binghe says, frustration tightening the corners of his mouth, "and the sect's history has had a lot more women than men as peak lords. It is only these past four generations that there has been an increase in men, and Shizun's generation especially so."

That was so weird.

It made sense from a narrative standpoint, perhaps. Shen Yuan knew that Qi Qingqi had been mentioned in the original, though he wasn't sure if Luo Binghe had ever run into Yi Qingsong or Tang Qingling. But a stallion protagonist couldn't burn down the sect if he was going to marry a bunch of peak lords, so most likely they had died off-screen or something.

The two from the sect that *had* entered the harem had been Liu Mingyan and Ning Yingying. But–

Liu Mingyan had been on her whole edgy "avening my brother" arc and had left the sect before joining Luo Binghe's side, and Ning Yingying had become disillusioned as well once she had found out the truth about how Shen Qingqiu had *intentionally* thrown her future husband into the Endless Abyss. So neither had truly been part of the sect by the time Luo Binghe razed it to the ground.

But none of that would happen in this world.

Because Liu Qingge was alive, and Shen Yuan was not going to let the abyss arc happen. Ning Yingying and Binghe were going to have a nice, healthy, *normal* wedding and he was going to buy them the best plum wine from the Zui Xian Peak, and everything would be fine.

He would probably buy a bottle for himself as well. If he survived.

Watching his- watching them–

Shen Yuan would want a bottle for himself, that was all.

It just didn't make sense that there had been so *many* badass women in the sect, when Binghe hadn't even been born yet. When they were all dead *now.* What was the point? The history hadn't been touched on much, not in the original. At least not from the bits that Shen Yuan could remember. So how come the sect had been overrun with women a few generations ago, and now it was the opposite?

Not that he was complaining.

Maybe it was a way to keep Binghe's future harem to a reasonable size? Did that make sense? No.

Shen Yuan sat up. Binghe's hand fell from his forehead, the warmth left behind making his skin feel tingly. Shen Yuan let out an explosive sigh.

"Maybe someone was named after a fish," he says, pulling one book closer, "she wore fish-robes, right? Some people like to wear their namesake. She could have been one of those."

And it would be a total Airplane-move as well.

But could this woman be counted as an Airplane-made character? She was dead, so many years before the story began. Should he ask him? Shen Yuan hadn't quite figured out how to make those paper birds fly before Wei Qingwei took him away from An Ding Peak, but he could still try! Though there was the risk of Shen Qingqiu snatching the letter before it got anywhere.

Ugh.

Shen Yuan stares down at the book and wonders if maybe they *should* wait for Wei Qingwei to decide that Shen Yuan was old enough.

Finding out more about Fu Yue had seemed like an easy thing. Just a bit of stubbornness and a lot of books. Something doable, that Wei Qingwei was silly about trying to keep a secret, because he didn't know how old Shen Yuan actually was.

Only, now it feels like a needle in a haystack.

"We should be looking for the talisman stuff instead," Shen Yuan mutters, "that's *useful.* We aren't going to get anywhere with this."

Unlike Binghe's seal, Fu Yue's origins didn't have a time limit. It was a neat little side-quest, a plotpoint that was simply there to give out some pity-points and a title. The progress bar said *2%.*

To pursue Fu Yue's origins over the *actual* plot was selfish. He would live without knowing everything about his own sword; if Binghe's origins were revealed, his friend might live, but–

It can't happen. It won't.

"And Shizun has to give back Fu Yue eventually, right?" he adds with forced cheer, even though Shen Qingqiu had been a bitch that morning, as he tauntingly touched Shen Yuan's own sword in front of him. Like *scum.* "Wei-shishu said so."

When he looks up, Binghe's mouth is twisted into what's almost a pout, staring down at his own hands as he flexes his fingers.

It's because he's a good friend, of course. Shen Yuan knows that his Binghe doesn't want to give up, to let Shen Qingqiu win this weird fucking cold war that's going on. It's not in his nature to just roll over.

But Meng Mo had told Binghe that the seal could break at any time. Even someone as loyal and kind as Binghe would know what the priority should be. Though, speaking of priority–

"Does Binghe's hands hurt?" he asks.

Stupid question, really. Of course they do. Shen Yuan *gouged* at them. How could they not hurt? And then he had gone and forgotten to heal them, even though Shen Qingqiu himself had told him off for it.

But he can heal them now.

"Yuan shouldn't worry," Binghe says as he cradles his hands close to himself, "it only itches."

"I'm fine," Shen Yuan huffs, and holds his own out, "let this one heal Binghe. Or is he going to risk getting blood all over these books? We would be banned for life."

"I'm not bleeding-"

"They could reopen, couldn't they? Binghe can't be sure. Come on."

"Yuan," Binghe slowly says, very much *not* handing over any of his hands, instead looking at Shen Yuan with his big, dark eyes, "how long must one recover after a qi deviation, before they can do anything like this?"

"... not that long," he lies.

"Yuan."

“It will be fine, *I’m* fine.”

“So am I, but there is no need to heal so quickly-”

“Just let me do it!”

Silence.

Shen Yuan can’t remember standing up. Looming, his hands stinging from where he slammed them against the table, throat hurting from yelling. Binghe is still sitting down.

His eyes are wide.

Shen Yuan swallows. Flexes his fingers, stiff and aching, fingertips numb and palms burning. Waiting for something to happen. Anything. A librarian kicking them out, his own body imploding. *Something.* Instead the silence remains, a suffocating blanket that makes his throat tighten.

Slowly, Shen Yuan sits back down.

His mouth feels too dry, like his lips are stuck together. He can’t talk. He *should* talk. What the fuck was that? Why would he yell at Binghe? His Binghe- his *friend* was only concerned. That’s what friends do. They worry.

A book closes. Shen Yuan stares down at his hands, waiting for the sound of Binghe walking away. Probably with the excuse of giving Shen Yuan space, to hide how angry Binghe is. Or sad. Is he sad? Is Binghe-

Shen Yuan jumps as Binghe leans against him. Somehow, without him noticing, the other boy had slid over until they were touching. Not leaving at all. Instead he is taking one of Shen Yuan’s hands into his, the warmth almost stifling against the heat brewing under Shen Yuan’s skin.

“It’s late,” Binghe says, moving Shen Yuan’s fingers. Pressing down at his palm. Guiding him through the hand exercises which Mu Qingfang ordered. Shen Yuan watches, staring down at the hand that’s a little wider, a little shorter than his. Shen Yuan’s fingers look too long in comparison. Knobbly knuckles, like his stupid, too long legs with their stupid, knobbly knees. Binghe’s hands, even at fifteen, looks strong and warm. Thin scars sprawled across them, white little lines that will disappear together with the demonic seal.

“We should go and eat. Maybe see where Shijie went,” Binghe continues, not sounding upset at all. Even though Shen Yuan can feel the ridges of where he hurt him, wounds he needs to fix but *can’t,* because he can’t do anything at all. No one will fucking let him.

Shen Yuan’s breath shudders. Grasps Binghe’s hand in his, and Binghe lets him. The sound of Shen Yuan’s breathing is too loud, too quick, but Binghe doesn’t let go. They sit. Binghe’s hand is warm. The fire within settles, goes from blazing to simmering to embers. Out of sight, someone coughs.

He squeezes Binghe’s hand.

“I’m sorry I yelled,” he says.

“Yuan can yell as much as he wants,” Binghe replies, “he won’t stop being my friend.” A pause, a hesitation. “But are you alright?”

I’m fine.

Except those words turned into yelling. Shen Yuan closes his mouth before he can voice them, and stares at Binghe’s hand in his, letting his eyes wander upwards until he can see his friend’s face.

“... I’m really tired,” he says.

“Should we-”

The sound of two growling bellies interrupt. Shen Yuan blushes, and sees Binghe do the same. They stare at each other in horrified embarrassment, until Shen Yuan’s lips twitch upwards, Binghe’s mirroring, and suddenly they’re stifling their giggles, leaning into each other to stay upright as they try to stay quiet.

“Food first,” Shen Yuan wheezes once the worst has passed, “right?”

“Right,” Binghe giggles.

They gather up their books and they don’t talk about healing or feelings or anything at all, except for what food might be served for the day. And if Shen Yuan keeps pressing his fingers against the palm of his hand, the one which Binghe held, well.

It’s fine. He’s just enjoying the warmth, because he’s always cold.

That’s all.

It’s not fine.

When they return to the bamboo house that evening, it is empty.

Empty, except for Fu Yue.

Shen Yuan doesn’t see it at first. He and Binghe are too busy discussing *why* the food at the food hall is so damn tasteless, the strongest flavor being goddamn cherry blossoms. So, like, no flavor but *pink imagination.* The apples Ning Yingying nicked for the three of them had more flavor in one bite than anything else. The steam from the tea Binghe made that *morning* had more flavor than–

Shen Yuan looks to the desk, just to see if Shen Qingqiu is glowering at them or if he's away on his patrols again. His eyes slide over the desk that's just a little too crammed with things, the damn chili jar sitting ominously by one pile of ignored scrolls, slides over the black hilt of Fu Yue, slides over the collection of fans nearby, one hand going to the one still in his belt, a reminder that he *has* one, no need to touch those.

He stops. Binghe walks right into him, and Shen Yuan wants to apologize. It is only that his eyes snapped back to what he nearly missed, and now he can't look away.

Shen Qingqiu isn't in the room.

The door to his bedroom is closed; Shen Yuan can see that from the corner of his eye. He doesn't know if that means the man is home, or if he actually *is* out on patrol. Except Shen Qingqiu *can't* have left; not without Fu Yue. He wouldn't.

"Yuan?"

Shen Yuan mutely points at his sword.

Fu Yue is leaning against the desk. Like it has been put down for just a moment, to free one's hands of it. The light from the fireplace sets the pale gems alight, making them look like fire opals, and it just. Sits there.

He wants to go to it. He wants to pick it up, to tuck it against his side and welcome the soft music that always accompanies Fu Yue. Shen Yuan *can.* Shen Qingqiu wouldn't be quick enough to stop him, even if he was hiding in his bedroom, waiting for Shen Yuan to make a mistake. The man had snatched Fu Yue when Shen Yuan was knocked out, anyway. He couldn't do it again if Shen Yuan was *awake,* could he?

Shen Yuan *should* pick it up.

Binghe steps forward; stops when Shen Yuan grabs at his arm, still unable to look away from his sword.

"Shizun isn't here," Binghe says, one hand placed over Shen Yuan's, "doesn't Yuan want to…?"

"It could be a trap," he says.

"It's a very obvious one if so," Binghe points out, which, fair. Shen Qingqiu wouldn't insult their intelligence *that* much. Maybe. Or.

"Reverse psychology," Shen Yuan mutters.

"Reverse what?"

"Maybe he is making it so obvious that we think it's *not* a trap," Shen Yuan explains, taking a cautious step forward. He half expects the sound of a pressure plate, but of course the floor stays the same. "And then it turns out to be one, after all, and then he will pop out of nowhere and call us idiots and lock me up in a cellar or something."

“Then we will go to Zhangmen-shibo,” Binghe says, but Shen Yuan knows he’s looking behind them, towards the door. “He won’t let Yuan be locked up.”

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan says.

“I won’t let Yuan be locked up,” Binghe says, and Shen Yuan smiles at him, chest fuzzy and warm, because yeah. Binghe wouldn’t. He looks back to the sword, still there. Unmoving.

Fu Yue is so close.

He swallows.

“What if it’s fake?” he whispers, so low it’s barely audible over the crackling from the fireplace, “what if that’s why Shizun went down to the village? To make a- a copy.” It sounds far fetched even to him.

But Shen Qingqiu had done more for less in the original story.

“Does it feel fake?”

“... no,” Shen Yuan admits.

Even from this distance, he *knows* that’s Fu Yue. He can’t hear the music or feel the soothing calm of it, but he knows in his heart that it is his sword, that if he touches it he will feel whole and calm and safe.

Fuck, should he just go for it?

Outside, Ming Fan’s voice drifts through the evening air, just loud enough for them to hear from inside the house. He must be close; he must be–

Speaking with Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Yuan and Binghe share a glance of pure panic. Not a word is exchanged before they bolt. They get to their room right as the front door opens, and it feels as if they just got away with a crime.

Even though Fu Yue stayed behind.

Fuck.

That should have been the end of it.

Except Shen Yuan kept *finding it.*

Fu Yue, just lounging about, left out in the open. Leaning against the desk, and then the bookshelf. Placed on the table. Once right by the *door.* Not even the door to the house, but the door to their fucking bedroom.

Always inside the bamboo house. Always without Shen Qingqiu.

It's driving him insane.

It takes five days before Shen Yuan snaps.

It is nearing lunch time, close enough that his stomach aches, just a bit. The sun shines bright, the sky a vivid blue with barely a cloud in sight. For the first time in what feels like forever, the fireplace has not been lit. Binghe still has to chop wood because Shen Qingqiu is a petty bitch.

Shen Yuan puts down a pile of scrolls on the petty bitch's desk.

"Why is Ming Fan not delivering these?" Shen Qingqiu asks, watching as Shen Yuan tries to pile them up in such a way they won't all roll off the desk. It's a fruitless endeavor. If he could just move the stupid chili jar into a better position, then *maybe* he could use it to block them in. But there's no way he's touching that thing.

"Da-shixiong is at the library," Shen Yuan begins.

That is when Shen Qingqiu leans Fu Yue against the desk. Casually, as if he is doing nothing of note. As if it's unimportant.

Shen Yuan's grasp on the scrolls loosen. They roll away, clattering to the floor, so loud in the silence that falls as he stares at Fu Yue. The sword's handle is brushing against the chili jar. It's close. He doesn't even have to stretch his hand out all the way to reach it. His hands remain where they are.

"Why do you keep doing that?" he finally asks. Demands, really. He doesn't mean to, but the words are out and Shen Yuan can't take them back.

"Disciple Shen should mind his tone."

He really should.

"You keep doing that!" Shen Yuan says instead, and points at Fu Yue, "leaving it around! Why do you do that!"

Shen Qingqiu stands up like a sword being drawn, sharp and graceful, face about as inviting as a sharp blade would be. Shen Yuan steps back with clenched fists.

“Don’t be insolent,” Shen Qingqiu says in a low voice, “and do not act like a dog that cannot do more than bark. Speak properly, and perhaps this master will deign to give an answer.”

“Fu Yue,” Shen Yuan grits out, “Shizun keeps leaving it around. Like- like it’s a toy! If Shizun no longer wants to keep *my* sword, can he not give it back instead of acting like it’s trash!?”

“For someone who so badly wants it back, disciple Shen has certainly done little to rectify it,” Shen Qingqiu replies, “and do not *bark.* Lower your voice, or–” he reaches, hand going towards the jar. The mere sight makes the back of Shen Yuan’s throat *burn,* his eyes sting.

“I’m not eating any fucking chili!” he snarls and reaches out with his qi; the jar comes flying into his hands, fast enough that he almost drops it.

Shen Qingqiu looks at him, inscrutable.

His hand is on Fu Yue.

Shen Yuan stares, mind blank. He looks down at the jar in his hands, then back at his sword. At Shen Qingqiu’s hand, resting against it.

“Oh,” he says, like an idiot.

“Disciple Shen moved that jar with nothing but his qi,” Shen Qingqiu says, picking up Fu Yue. He does not tuck it into his belt, nor does he take his eyes off of Shen Yuan.

Shen Yuan hugs the jar to his chest.

“Yes?” he warily replies, “is Shizun going to get mad about that as well?”

“It is a ceramic jar. A full one,” Shen Qingqiu says. He says it like that’s an answer, when it’s clearly not. Shen Yuan considers throwing the damn thing at him.

“I’m *aware* that it’s a full one,” he hisses instead, “that’s why I took it.”

“It’s heavy,” Shen Qingqiu says, like he’s an idiot.

“I’m not *that* weak!” He can hold a damn jar!

“It is *heavy,”* Shen Qingqiu says, exasperation in his voice, “when one is only using *qi.* Surely even a little fool like *you* is aware of the difference?”

“It’s… it’s not that heavy,” he insists, but it feels like he’s missing a step. Like the man is speaking with double layers, and Shen Yuan only just realized there was a layer at all. “Fu Yue is heavy,” he continues, “any sword is! We move those just fine, so what is Shizun-?”

“Idiot,” Shen Qingqiu says, stepping around the desk, getting closer. Shen Yuan stays where he is, feet glued to the floor, and fuck, he *hopes* he looks like he’s standing his ground and not like he’s just fucking stuck where he is, “we use sword signs to move our weapons. Signs which only work for the sword which we are *bound* to.”

Fu Yue's pommel presses against Shen Yuan's chest. There is a tug, deep within, even through his clothes. He looks at it, breath stuck, heart beating like a drum.

"The signs and that bond does the heavy lifting," Shen Qingqiu continues, speaking slowly and condescendingly, "not one's qi alone. A child with your cultivation should not have been able to move that jar."

Shen Yuan drags his eyes away from Fu Yue.

Shen Qingqiu looks at him in a way that he never has before.

It is not a warm gaze, nor is it cold. Shen Yuan has seen the man's glares, his annoyance, even the warmth afforded for Ning Yingying alone. He *knows* that Shen Qingqiu thinks he's a fucking idiot, is well aware that the man tolerates him at best.

This is different.

Shen Qingqiu is looking at him like–

"Perhaps you are not hopeless after all," Shen Qingqiu says as he takes the jar from Shen Yuan's hands, "very well. This master recognizes potential."

The black sheathe of Fu Yue is placed in his hands. He flinches, then holds it tight, as if the man before him will take it back if he doesn't. Strings of silver wrap around his very core, a soft and gentle hello, vibrations of joy as he holds the other part of his soul after what felt like an eternity apart.

"I will ensure that you do not waste it," Shen Qingqiu says. Looking at Shen Yuan as if he has suddenly become useful, something of value.

As if Shen Yuan *matters.*

In his hands, Fu Yue sings.

Chapter End Notes

SQQ: *leaves sword out* pspsp take it when I'm not looking
SY:
SQQ: Why the fuck is the child not taking his damn sword-
SY: this is a trap.
SQQ:
SY: I'm ONTO you!

Hiiii, sorry for the long, long wait! Hope you're all doing well! Also.

TIME! SKIP! TIME!!!!! FOR THE TIME SKIP!!!! WOOO I DID IT!!!!

Hrm, anyway! I'm very excited for what the future holds, ahhh!!

I do however have bad and good news! Some which might not be that surprising, but please act super-duper shocked anyway.

First of all, I'm going to abandon my update schedule of every two weeks.
I'm still going to do my best to upload within a month at minimum, and there will likely be times I will update more often. But I am no longer going to contain myself to once every two weeks.
I'll still update on Mondays! (my time, anyway)

The reason is quite simple; I have worked on syonr for two whole years now, and I'm going to keep working at it. It's my baby. But as time passed, I kept getting more ideas. Oneshots based around syonr itself (like a MQF/WQW oneshot) and stories that has nothing to do with syonr at all. I then kept thinking I could write them after I finished syonr, because I didn't have the TIME to write on them now. And then I blinked and two whole years passed, and I realized this would take a while. And the idea of not writing on anything else kind of made me feel a bit burnt out, which is also part of why this update took ages, because I needed to feel a bit sorry for myself first.

Guys, I really want to write on other things without feeling guilty. I am still going to write syonr, it's a habit, a routine, it's my treasure, and I do love writing on it. I just also want to write on other things without feeling like I'm cheating on my wife. So!

Updates will still be on Mondays, I'm NOT abandoning this fic, and I am forever and ever super grateful for all the love this story receives. Thank you so much!

And now, fanart <3

Rhiangalaxy drew Shen Yuan holding pangolins! Deeply jealous, I too want to hold a pangolin.
they also drew the boys being cute

coffeepaintwater made some awesome character designs of BingYuan and SQQ+SY, and oh I spot a Fu Yue too!!!

teazart made a whole comic, and it's gorgeous. It's the "I don't want to kiss anyone" talk, and I love it <3

raindeathlily returns!!! First is BingYuan holding hands, aw <3 I love them!!!
Raindeathlily also drew the storage scene from ages ago. Zhao De my son!
And last but not least, behold, Shen Qingqiu

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Siyokoy were humanoid monsters who drowned their victims in order to feed on the bloated remains. They had green scales, red eyes, the ugliest face in the whole world and far too many tentacles sticking out from the weirdest places, such as the chin, armpits and the back of their knees. Also there were claws. And very big teeth and they fucking reeked like mildew had a baby with a decomposing corpse that had been shat out. They were gross and very angry and also fucked up mermen that lived at sea, snatching fishermen out of boats to stuff their bodies inbetween rocks for eating later.

Except this was a lake.

Shen Yuan wasn't sure if it was a fuck-up from Airplane's side, or if this was something to actually investigate, considering the sea was days of travel away. He and Binghe hadn't had time to discuss it; the scroll with information on their hunt, as well as the witnesses they had spoken with, all claimed it had been fish demons. Which was, like, *totally* cool if super fucking wrong, because siyokoy didn't even look like fish demons.

Fish demons had fish heads and a beautiful absence of tentacles.

"How many left?" Shen Yuan calls out as he sprints across the beach, using qingqong to avoid sinking into the muddied sand. The siyokoy close behind him is slower on land, though no less angry, shrieking as it chases after, clawing at the air.

"Only Yuan's!" Binghe shouts back right as a head goes flying past Shen Yuan. There's a *thud!* from when it hits the pursuing siyokoy in the face.

It's the perfect distraction.

Shen Yuan whirls around, grabs the talisman from within his sleeve and flicks it towards the siyokoy. It lands on its brow, causing the demon to flail and snarl, trying to swat the paper off of itself as the letters on it begin to glow and then–

The demon disappears with a poof.

Shen Yuan blinks; Binghe lands next to him, looking just as confused.

"Is it invisible?" the protagonist wonders, poking at the empty air with Zheng Yang, the blade glinting in the sun. There is nothing.

"That's not what it's meant to do," Shen Yuan protests, "and we would still *hear* it, wouldn't we? None of them have been very quiet." In fact, every single one of them had been shrieking non-stop since the two of them first arrived.

He glances towards the lake, and the bodies bobbing in the water. It had taken as much work to keep one of them alive as it had to kill the rest of them. To think that testing talismans in the fields could be so challenging! And *gross;* there is water inside his boots. His left foot is feeling especially itchy, like something is crawling inside of it. Ew.

“But it can’t have vanished,” Binghe points out, moving closer towards where the siyokoy disappeared, “that’s impossible, to make something disappear without a trace. Which talisman did Yuan use?”

“Prototype fifteen, y’know, the one that might make a demon feel like a human, aura-wise? I figured if it worked on *that* thing, then it should work on Binghe as well. And– ow!”

Binghe whirls back, raising his sword.

“Yuan?”

“I- something bit me,” Shen Yuan replies, bewildered, “inside my boot- *fuck!”* He stomps, then begins to hop on one foot, trying to wrench the boot off of him, “if I got a leech on me *again,* I’m going to…” the shoe comes off, and he throws it to the side to clutch at his foot.

For a moment, they both stare.

The tiny siyokoy stares back; and then it bites again.

Shen Yuan shrieks.

After a lot of panic, more high-pitched screaming when it crawls up Shen Yuan’s fucking *leg,* and chasing after the tiny siyokoy when it finally lets go to make a run for it, they eventually manage to kill it by stomping down on it. It’s a horrifying mess, and nothing at all like what a cultivator *should* do. There was nothing badass or graceful about it, which was a shame, since everything before that *had* been pretty cool.

“Do you think we can fudge the report?” Shen Yuan asks, once he is dry and doesn’t smell like something gross and questionable, “there is no need to tell anyone about the end, is there?”

“Well, we can’t write about the talisman,” Binghe points out, looking over the prototype which they had taken off the siyokoy’s body once it reverted back to its original size. It’s mostly intact. Unlike the very squished body, which had made them both gag. “So there is no reason to include… that.”

“Agreed,” Shen Yuan nods, “now please hold still.”

They are currently by the roadside; a fair distance from the lake. Here, the air is fresh and wonderfully stench-free, Bao and Lotus grazing nearby, flicking their tails. The scenery is boring in comparison, with its dirt road and occasional tree by the wayside, but Shen Yuan does prefer it over the mess they left behind.

He is not going to think about the qiankun pouch filled with decapitated siyokoy heads. Or the process of said decapitation.

Not for the first time since they began to go out on hunts, Shen Yuan wishes people could just take them by their words instead of demanding body parts for proof. It's one thing when it's demonic beasts, but humanoid ones are…

No, Shen Yuan isn't going to think about all *that* right now. Instead he is going to concentrate on drying Binghe's hair without making it frizzy. It is a careful process, requiring quite a lot of focus.

"I think I found the problem," Binghe says as Shen Yuan uses his fingers to card through soft curls, preparing to braid his friend's hair, "it must be the sign we used with the intent to shrink the aura of a demon."

Shen Yuan peers over his shoulder.

"Ah," he says, "Binghe is correct. Oh, wait! Does that mean it can only shrink demons? That could be useful, if we can figure out what ratio is used…"

"So we will put it on the more testing list?"

"Sounds good. Now, Binghe's hair. One single braid or would Binghe like braids *in* his hair? Or maybe just a little bun today?"

"Whatever would please Yuan."

"Silly. It is your hair, I'm asking *you."*

"I like whatever Yuan likes," Binghe replies, only to laugh and squirm away when Shen Yuan pinches his side for being cheeky. The sound makes him smile, no matter how much Shen Yuan tries to bite it back.

He wishes they could stay right here, forever.

Shen Yuan never thought he would become used to riding a horse.

In a different time, he had just never been interested in it. His sister had plastered horse posters over every wall when she was eight, and had rambled many hours to anyone who would listen about how she was *definitely* going to get one in the future, even if they lived in the middle of a big city. Shen Yuan had listened, but he had never thought to go looking for horses.

In *this* life, a servant was not meant to ride a horse. One was meant to ride in carriages, close at hand to attend their lady. And while Shen Yuan had ridden Bao on their first mission, he had thought that the future would be spent flying on Fu Yue.

Well, flying for many hours fucking sucked. There were bugs that had a tendency to fly right into one's mouth and eyes, hair whipping into your face if the wind decided to turn. Not to speak of standing up. For hours.

Cultivation helped one withstand it, but it was *so boring.*

Riding a horse alongside Binghe was much nicer. They did not need to raise their voices over the wind, nor pay attention to where they were going. Bao and Lotus were used to following the road unless told otherwise, seasoned as they were. Shen Yuan thought if he chose to sleep sitting up, he would still find himself at the base of Cang Qiong Mountain when it was time to wake up.

Kind of. They had three days of travel distance to cover. Shen Yuan couldn't sleep the *whole* way there, as lovely as it sounded.

"We have time to stop by Yennan city," Shen Yuan says as the day grows late, the bright blue sky slowly shifting towards a soft lavender, "maybe we could spend the night there."

Binghe hums. He is carving a piece of wood. When they first left the mountain, it was an untouched rectangle of white, a type of wood Shen Yuan couldn't identify and forgot to ask. Now it has begun to take shape; he thinks it might be a horse head.

Fitting, since Lotus is white.

"I have coin," Shen Yuan adds, nudging Bao closer to his friend, close enough that they can touch if they were to reach, "Yue-ge gave me plenty before we left, and it is not like I've had the opportunity to spend any of it. Also, we have time!"

They truly do. They had been given two weeks to complete this hunt. Three days to arrive, and then it had taken one day to track their prey and another to kill the siyokoy. That meant they had twelve whole days, and it only took three to return.

"We only have one qiankun pouch and it is filled with siyokoy heads," Binghe says, tilting his head to send Shen Yuan a knowing glance, "so while this one would be happy to sleep in a bed, maybe it would do well for Yuan to remember last time he had coin to spare."

Shen Yuan huffs.

"Gege may have given me money, but I'm not *that* rich. I won't buy so many books this time. Besides, half of them were an order from Qing Jing's library," he argues, "it wasn't all my fault! And I wouldn't do that to poor Bao." He pats the horse's neck. "He's a cultivator's horse, not a pack mule. I won't burden him. This money will only go to a night, and maybe some good food! I promise."

“This humble one is grateful to Shixiong,” Binghe replies, steering Lotus away with a laugh as Shen Yuan tries to swat at him, “ah, but speaking of pack mules,” Binghe points ahead as they turn down a curve in the road, “we have company.”

Ahead of them is a cart. It is wide enough to take up half the road, and a tower of precariously stacked furniture to match. Shen Yuan eyes it, wondering if it will fall to a gust of wind or a bump in the road; whether the ropes and cloth keeping everything in place are enough. The two mules pulling it appear nonchalant to their burden, only their ears flicking backwards when they pick up on the sound of their approach.

The cart jolts over a rock. The tower wobbles.

Shen Yuan and Binghe exchange a grimace.

“Let’s just get ahead of the cart,” Shen Yuan whispers. Binghe nods, and they coax Bao and Lotus to pick up their speed, Lotus pulling slightly ahead so that they can put space between themselves and the cart.

But of course, putting the protagonist at the front has *consequences.*

“Good day,” they call out, polite nods exchanged with the man at the front of the cart. Shen Yuan spares a moment to admire his impressive fu manchu-styled beard, the ends going well past the man’s chin. Perhaps it would make him look like an evil sorcerer, if not for the way his eyes flicker here and there, big and wet like an anxious rat. As such, it only looks like he has drooping whiskers.

Still, he offers a wan smile, and for a moment it seems they will pass without issue.

“Ah!” the man then exclaims, forcing Shen Yuan and Binghe to twist in their saddles to look back at him, “young men! Are you perhaps cultivators?”

Uh-oh.

That’s *not* something one wants to hear when in a hurry! Some merchant guy asking about their profession is the number one plothook, the ultimate side-quest giver. If they say yes, he might just delay them from emptying Shen Yuan’s purse in Yennan city! Poor Lotus and Bao deserve a nice stable, some good oats and a few apples! That won’t happen if this fu manchu-guy ropes them into a random side-quest.

“Indeed we are,” Binghe politely replies before Shen Yuan can offer a blatant lie instead.

“How fortunate, why, perhaps you two could help this one?”

Fucking called it.

“We are currently on our way back after a successful hunt,” Shen Yuan cuts in, offering an apologetic smile, “our Shizun waits for our return, so we cannot delay for long.”

It’s not even a lie! Shen Qingqiu had made it very clear that they must return within two weeks. There is a time limit, and for good reason. The Immortal Alliance Conference is in six

weeks.

Of course, the man doesn't seem deterred. He rubs his hands together, classic scummy merchant style, and leans towards them. The mules, thankfully, keep walking straight ahead despite this.

"We travel in the same direction," he says smarmily, "if, perhaps, your honored selves intended to spend the night in Yennan city, this one could offer room in return for a bit of advice!"

They exchange a look.

Shen Yuan wrinkles his nose. Binghe sends a pointed glance to the qiankun pouch. Shen Yuan frowns. Binghe raises a brow.

Fine.

Not having to pay for a room *would* let him spend that money on actually fun and useful things. And if the shady as fuck merchant only wanted advice, then *maybe* it would be fine. Maybe they could wiggle their way off of the plot-hook, and some other poor bastard could be roped into it.

"Very well," Shen Yuan says, and pastes on a polite smile, Yue Qingyuan-style. It's a top tier kind of smile, a nine out of ten success rate! Practically a 10/10, because Shen Qingqiu shouldn't count. "Tell us of your troubles, sir."

"It all began when this one purchased a dining set," the merchant says, voice immediately switching to something conspiratorial, as if he is telling them of a closely guarded secret. "You see, the most esteemed gongzi, this one is a merchant! Specializing in buying works of beauty and selling it only to the most deserving. And this dining set is indeed beautiful! Cost me an arm and a leg, indeed!"

Is it in a million pieces as well? Shen Yuan doesn't ask, even when the tower of furniture shakes ominously upon passing over another rock. The thought that even a rock would remain undented in that cart seems very unlikely.

"I had a respectable store in Chang Zhe, you know," the man continues, "Filled with beautiful porcelain and vases, glasses made of crystal and the finest of tea pets! So when this one was presented with this dining set, how could I not purchase it for my store? White as ivory, with the most detailed paintings I've ever seen! Blue fish, swimming as if they are real, I swear!"

They straighten with attention.

The word *fish* has become a Pavlovian response to them. It is silly and a little embarrassing, even Ning Yingying commenting on how all of their missions have a 'fishy smell' to them. It is an unavoidable side effect from trying to track down the necklace which was stolen from Cang Qiong Mountain two years ago during the invasion, the very thing which might help Binghe hide his heritage. Fish demons (turned siyokoy) were only one of their latest attempts.

“This one presumes that the seller could not be found later?” Binghe says, reaching up to adjust the hairpin which Shen Yuan had slipped into his hair to keep all the braids in place. It is a fish, carved by Ning Yingying’s hands. Shen Yuan has a matching one.

Their Shijie thinks she’s *sooo* funny.

“Indeed, gongzi, but let this one tell the story in turn. I displayed the dining set in a place of honor, certain it would sell for a fortune. With those details, even the Emperor would be glad to own it, this I swear! But ah, Chang Zhe must have lacked the coin, for it remained unsold for a while. Many were interested, of course, but not in the entire set! Always asking to split it up, as if that would not be a true disgrace. But as time passed, it remained unsold… and so as much as it pained this one, truly tore at my poor heart, I agreed to sell only two plates rather than all of them.”

“How many were there to begin with?” Shen Yuan asks.

“Oh, I can’t remember now,” the merchant says with a nervously fake laugh, “enough to host a family! My memory isn’t what it used to be, of course, I’m not a young man anymore-”

So fucking sus.

“-but that is not what matters! What matters is that the very next day, those two plates were back on my shelf!”

“The ones you sold?”

“Indeed! As if they had never left! The buyer returned, claiming I had stolen them in an underhanded scheme. Me! Tell me, do I look like a man who *steals?”*

With that mustache? Definitely not. Maybe a con-man, though Shen Yuan knew better than to say as much.

“Sir does not,” he and Binghe say in unison, exchanging a quick grin. Unseen by the merchant, Shen Yuan reaches out one foot to nudge at Binghe’s. Binghe, of course, nudges back.

“Exactly!” the merchant shouts, oblivious, “of course I let them take the two plates to prove my innocence. But the very next day… there they were. Back with their brethren. Like magic!”

That *was* weird. Shen Yuan can’t recall such a plotline in the original. During this time, Binghe was mostly doing his best to prove his worth, trying to show to the Scum villain that he should be allowed at the Immortal Alliance Conference. There had been no missions involving fancy porcelain refusing to be sold.

“How strange,” Shen Yuan says, “it must have caused a lot of difficulties for you. Did it continue?”

“Yes. Every plate, bowl and cup this one sold, it all returned! Every single one which belonged to the set. Eventually, this one had to sell the store and leave town, for no one

believed my innocence, threatening to call the guards. So, here I am, telling you of my woes, on my way to Yinnan city."

Where he hoped none had heard of him.

Wait. Hold up.

"Did you leave the dining set behind?" Binghe asks, though they both already know the answer.

"Of course not! That cost me an arm and a leg, I tell you!"

Wow.

"So what advice is sir seeking?" Shen Yuan gets out, even as he wants to scream and rip his own hair out. The solution to this shady man's problem is obvious! Dump the dining set! Fucking dump it!!! He was ran out of town and he *still kept it–!*

"Ah, well, perhaps more… of a favor than advice," the fucking idiot wheedles, "once we arrive at my sister's abode-"

It wasn't even his fucking house???

"-then if you could kindly examine the plates, to perhaps see if they are possessed by something…? Just for my peace of mind, of course!"

"We can certainly do that," Binghe says, positioning himself so that the merchant can't see Shen Yuan losing his *mind,* "but we are only disciples, sir. If we cannot find any signs of a haunting, sir should consider asking for the advice of someone more experienced."

"Hm, well. You said you were from Cang Qiong Mountain Sect, did you not?"

"Yes, sir. Of Qing Jing Peak."

"Ah, then it will be fine! Haha! This humble one is certain even mere disciples will be capable of helping an old man such as I! Why, asking another cultivator for help would be far too costly. Timewise, of course!" he hurries to say, "obviously I have the coin, only this is a matter of great importance and urgency! If you two cannot find anything amiss, then it must have been the store at fault, not the dining set!"

"Let us hope," Binghe replies, so humble and polite that only Shen Yuan stands a chance at detecting the strain in his voice, "it would be a shame if misfortune follows you, sir."

"Indeed, indeed. Hm, now, what were your names?"

Yennan City loops around a hill so large it could be a mountain; houses with colorful roofs wrapped around it like a garland of flowers, stairs upon stairs weaving in and out until the very top. Upon the top, there is a temple with a golden crown glinting in the late spring evening's sun. That same golden glint seems to reflect against all the rice fields outside the city's walls, a canvas of lush green and glittering water.

It's only a little ruined by Pan Fu's boasting; Pan Fu being the merchant, having remembered to introduce himself after he finished fawning over them and their *noble, gentle, generous hearts.*

Thankfully, Pan Fu's sister does *not* live on the hill, but by the foot of it. This means that whatever the dining set might be, it won't be in a billion pieces from going up the hundreds of stairs. Shen Yuan figures examining a billion pieces of porcelain for signs of haunting is a more difficult task than, say, checking like ten whole plates for it. But that's just his opinion. Of course, that is assuming it didn't break during the journey.

Not that the merchant's sister seems very happy about this. Granted, maybe it has something to do with her obviously-an-idiot-brother returning with two strange teenagers, expecting not only to store his two mules and the tower of furniture and shadily sealed crates, but also expecting her to offer up a place to stick two cultivator horses plus two cultivator teens for at least one night.

She scowls at them, unimpressed as her brother explains the situation. Where her brother's hair is already turning gray, she is far more youthful. The age gap must be insane, or one of them has been blessed/cursed, for Pan Yingtai looks like a young woman rather than the gnarled housewife Pan Fu had implied her to be. She isn't even *married.*

Despite this, she can scold like the best of grandmas. Shen Yuan and Binghe pretend to not hear as she scolds her brother. Nope, they are totally super busy caring for their horses, no eavesdropping at all! Look as they remove the saddles, lead the horses to water, brush them down and inspect their hooves! They're too busy to eavesdrop! Too far away! And the hooves are clip-clopping so loudly against the stone of the little courtyard, impossible to hear anything over it!

"-of course I've heard of the Cang Qiong Mountain Sect," Pan Yingtai whispers, "one would have to be blind, deaf and live under a rock to avoid doing so. Does my *dear brother* truly expect that I can house such esteemed guests on such a short notice? We only have so many rooms!"

"Ah, Tai-mei," he coaxes, "they are only disciples, do they not all share a dorm at those sects? They won't mind sharing!"

"No! Brother shall sleep with his mules, so that the cultivators can have a room each, we cannot dishonor our family by letting them sleep with the servants-"

“We would not mind sharing a room,” Shen Yuan blurts out, making them turn their gaze upon him, “it is what we are used to, and we would not want to make the elderly sleep outside.”

“Do not worry about my brother. He is not as old as he seems,” Pan Yingtai says, “he is only thirty-five.”

Thirty-five? He looks like he is nearing seventy! What man of thirty-five has a fu manchu beard??? What the fuck! For every new bit of information, Shen Yuan feels like *he* is going to turn grey.

“We apologize,” Shen Yuan forces out, doing an excellent job of not gaping at Pan Fu, “this one should not have presumed. How could we make up for…?”

“He did refer to himself as an old man,” Binghe cuts in, “so perhaps sir could forgive us for assuming.” He says it in a nice, polite tone. Still, there is something to his tone that reminds everyone that he has a sword. Shen Yuan watches as Pan Fu’s eyes dart towards it.

He finds his own hand brushing against Fu Yue, and he knows that he isn’t imagining the amused lilt to the sword’s song. Shen Yuan bites back a smile, pressing his thumb against the crescent moon.

“Of course, of course,” Pan Fu nervously laughs, rubbing his hands together, “this one takes no offense! But ah, then, gongzis are fine with sharing…?”

“We would prefer it,” Shen Yuan says with a nod, feeding Bao an apple, throwing a second one to Binghe so that he can feed Lotus as well, “brothers must stay close, more so when away from home.”

“Brothers! Of course! Haha, I did not realize you were related, you look so different- well, that is! Family is so important, of course my dear sister won’t let me sleep outside-”

“Martial brothers,” Binghe corrects, giving Lotus’s neck a pat before he moves away, “but perhaps sir could show us the dining set, so that we may put any worries to rest? It is getting late.”

“Of course! It’s in that box.” He points.

They look at it.

Below the stacked furniture, the boxes that seem in danger of toppling at any moment, there is a box. It’s a big box. Perhaps, even, the biggest one in the whole cart. It is nailed shut, the dots of metal lining each side. It also has a red rope tied all around it, making it stand out all the more. It looks like the kind of rope meant to ward off evil spirits, though Shen Yuan can’t detect anything from it.

“The one at the bottom?” Shen Yuan asks, staring at it.

“Yes, that one. Please, you are such strong and healthy young men! Surely you can…?”

“Of course,” Shen Yuan hears himself say, “anything to settle our host’s fears.”

In the blink of an eye, they went from cultivators to free laborers. Somewhere between the sixth chair and the eight box with ‘fragile!’ stamped onto it, Shen Yuan thinks they should have just paid for a room instead. By the time they have unloaded everything, including the big, ominous box itself, he is sure of it.

Even Binghe looks like he has regrets.

“How many plates can a dining set have?” Shen Yuan mutters as they untie the rope, “or is it all padding to prevent it from breaking?”

“The rope is a normal rope, dyed red,” Binghe says, rolling it into something manageable, the ends of it fraying, “and there is no demonic or ghostly qi from the outside.”

“I bet this is some kind of publicity stunt,” Shen Yuan complains, because Pan Fu has scurried off to wash up, the damn bastard, leaving them alone in the room in which they stored everything. It’s cramped. “I bet he scammed us just to get out of the heavy lifting. My arms hurt and I got a splinter on each finger.”

“I’m sorry, Yuan. It was my idea.”

“Binghe should stop being silly,” Shen Yuan hands over the crowbar, stepping back to let Binghe break open the lid, “you’re only acting as a cultivator should.” As a protagonist should. “We are meant to help those in need, are we not? We were just unlucky this time.” A pause. “Maybe we can demand something more for the bother. Does Binghe think Shizun would want a tea pet? Pan Fu mentioned he had some, didn’t he?”

“Pan Fu did mention he had tea pets,” Binghe says, wincing when the lid splits down the middle with a loud crack, “though would Shizun want one?”

Fair question. It was a whimsical thing. He would probably accuse them of trying to waste his tea, and then let the poor tea pet gather dust, forever deprived of its purpose.

“Gege would like one,” Shen Yuan decides, “and Mu-shishu, as well. Maybe we could get one for each peak lord, that seems reasonable enough. Everyone likes a good tea pet.” He takes hold of the lid and lets it rest against the side of the box. “And if twelve are too much, then we deserve at least one for both of us! That’s not unreasonable, is it?”

Binghe smiles, his eyes glinting in the lantern light of the room. Sometime during their work, he had tied up his sleeves.

At seventeen, Binghe’s arms are a long way from the thin noodles Shen Yuan remembers from their first meeting. There are tan lines right by the elbow, a sliver of skin paler than the rest, a glimpse that Shen Yuan quickly turns away from. He uses qi to pull the splinters from his fingers and lets the sting linger a moment too long.

“Yuan is right,” Binghe agrees, and then they look inside the box.

The very first thing they see is hay and rags, lining the walls. They have to reach down to shove it aside so that they can see the famed dining set. Shen Yuan expects cracked plates, perhaps the voice of the merchant popping out of nowhere to accuse them of breaking his shit, demanding repayment. There is no way a few rags and some hay could have saved the plates during the long journey to Yinnan city.

And yet.

Within the box, there are plates. Stacked in high piles, perfect rows of plates topped with cups and bowls. They count nine pillars of them, two teacups on top of two bowls for each stack, and then the plates beneath them. Eighteen bowls and eighteen teacups, and *way* more than eighteen plates.

"What the fuck," Shen Yuan says, picking up one of the teacups, "no wonder he couldn't sell the whole set! Who needs *eighteen* teacups? And the plates- how many are there?"

Binghe tilts his head, peering between the stacks.

"Ten for each stack," he says at last, bewildered.

"Ten times nine… that's ninety plates. Who would buy *ninety plates!?"*

"A man who should not be a merchant," Binghe says, gingerly sliding one plate free to bring it into view, "I don't think he was as successful as he said, back in Chang Zhe."

"And there's no ghostly qi."

"Not even a little."

Shen Yuan huffs, peering into the teacup.

At least it *is* beautiful. The white has an iridescent gleam to it in the lantern light, and the blue paint shimmers like lapis, like gemstones at the bottom of a pond. The teacup has fish swimming along it, so detailed that Shen Yuan half expects to feel the bumps of scales against his fingers when he traces the pattern, or the flick of fins as the fish swim away. But they remain still, flat as a painting on porcelain is expected to be.

He wonders how many details he would be able to spot, if he had a magnifying glass.

Looking at the plate in Binghe's hand shows the same kind of detail there. They *are* gorgeous, every single piece, and he can understand if one plate costs a small fortune.

But ninety? Not to speak of the eighteen cups and bowls.

Shen Yuan presses his qi against the cup in his hand. As expected, he gets nothing back in return. He can feel it when Binghe does the same, and once again, nothing happens.

Works of art, but only that.

“Well,” Shen Yuan says, carefully putting it back, “it’s weird, but not supernatural weird, so I think we’re good.”

“Should we seal the box?”

“He will just ask us to open it again,” Shen Yuan says, stretching, “leave it. Let’s see if Pan Fu has convinced his sister to feed us, I’m starving and so is Binghe.”

“Am I?” Binghe asks, amused.

“I heard your belly complain earlier,” Shen Yuan says, bumping their shoulders together, “don’t be silly. Inedia doesn’t suit you.”

“Nor does it suit Yuan,” Binghe replies.

As if on cue, both their stomachs growl.

By the time a flustered Pan Yingtai finds them, they are too busy laughing, leaning on each other in a fit of giggles.

There is a smudge of ink against a pale cheek.

It curves along the bone there, a stroke that highlights the sharpness of Shen Yuan’s face. A careless swipe of his hand, nearly touching his bottom eyelid, smudging towards his ear. It shines in the lantern light, still not dry.

The block of wood rests in Luo Binghe’s hand, the carving knife in his other hand briefly forgotten as he watches his friend write. The sound of the brush dragging against scrap wood is a barely there sound. Audible only because of how close they sit, crowded together on the only bed in the room.

Shen Yuan had turned bright red when it was revealed. One bed, he had hissed, and Luo Binghe had remembered the romance stories which the three of them often crowded around, Ning Yingying’s laughter as Shen Yuan sputtered with outrage when the man in the story had not offered to sleep on the floor, to preserve the maiden’s virtue, but instead far too eagerly slipped into the bed to join her.

When Luo Binghe offered to sleep on the floor, his friend had only scoffed and shoved him onto the bed, telling him off for being an idiot.

Outside, the sun is gone. Only a sliver of orange can be seen on the horizon, like one of Ning Yingying's silk ribbons laid flat on the ground. Soon that too will be gone, leaving only the stars.

Luo Binghe wants to swipe away the ink on Shen Yuan's face. For a moment, he briefly imagines kissing it away, staining his own lips black. It is a thought he is quick to shove away.

"Did Yuan not say he was tired?" Luo Binghe asks instead, putting aside the half-carved wooden block, sheathing the knife to lay next to it, "can the talismans not wait?"

"I'm not so tired I can't work on it a little longer," Shen Yuan replies, brows furrowing. He taps the wooden end of the brush against his lips, considering the hanzi he has used. With normal ink against normal wood, it will do nothing. It is the safest way they have found, to do their secret experimenting. "If we can't find that necklace soon, then I want a talisman ready for the conference."

Oh.

Luo Binghe looks at him. He watches as Shen Yuan pushes the hair out of his face, smearing ink on the tip of his nose when he scratches at it. He wonders what will happen, at the Immortal Alliance Conference.

Is that when the seal will break?

Is there only six weeks left before the world will know what he is? Before the filth within his veins spills forth, no longer contained by the seal someone placed upon him when young?

The thought is terrifying. Luo Binghe silently removes his outer robes, plucks the hairpin out of Shen Yuan's hair. His friend pays him no mind, oblivious to the dread pooling inside of Luo Binghe's stomach. As always, Shen Yuan does not shy away from his touch.

Luo Binghe focuses on that. He coaxes the brush out of his friend's hands, takes the scrap of wood when Shen Yuan reaches for the brush, and manages a smile when his friend huffs in defeat.

"Perhaps prototype fifteen will be good enough, if there are no other options," Luo Binghe suggests, and cleans Shen Yuan's face with a handkerchief.

The other boy scowls, then laughs upon realizing what Luo Binghe is saying.

"That would certainly be something," Shen Yuan jokes, "I can shrink Binghe and smuggle him away in my pocket, before anyone realizes anything is amiss!"

"I'm sure the pocket would be very comfortable," he replies, and slips under the blanket when Shen Yuan holds it up for him.

The bed is small. Enough so that they can't avoid touching, and Shen Yuan only hesitates for a moment before he tucks his cold feet against Luo Binghe's ankles. He shudders, and in turn his friend giggles.

It has been a while since they last shared a bed.

Whether or not they were scammed by the merchant, Luo Binghe does not care. Not if it means they can hug tight, knees knocking together as they try to find a comfortable position. Not if it means he can focus on how red the tip of Shen Yuan's ears are, rather than what might happen in six weeks. He missed it.

Shen Yuan must have missed it as well, for he does not voice a single complaint.

Eventually, they settle down. Shen Yuan kills the flame with a flick of his finger, castin the room into darkness. It is dark enough that Luo Binghe can only catch the glimpse of moonlight shining against Shen Yuan's eyes.

"Sleep or dream?" Shen Yuan whispers, always reluctant to speak too loudly in the darkness. A habit they have both grown used to, sharing a house with Shen Qingqiu.

"Sleep," Luo Binghe whispers back, daring to tuck his face against Shen Yuan's neck, burrowing close to inhale his scent. He is too tired to deal with Meng Mo, or to think more about what Shen Yuan might have seen of the future, what he might be sensing without knowing.

He only wants this; arms wrapped around each other in a bed too small, Shen Yuan's pulse against Luo Binghe's nose. A rhythm as soothing as any lullaby.

"Alright," Shen Yuan says, and smoothes one hand over his hair in a drowsy gesture, "sleep well, Binghe."

"Sleep well, Yuan."

And so they do.

Chapter End Notes

SY: we're back from another fish themed hunt!
WQW: did you have a fintastic time? :D
SY: wait no-
WQW: don't play koi, let minnow all the details!
SY: STOP
NYY: A-Yuan, A-Luo, I made some fintastic hairpins for you!
WQW: I already did that one!
NYY: DAMN IT

I love puns. Puns my beloved, how I adore you.
Anyway! Wow!!! How many expected me to skip directly to the immortal conference? :D

Surprise, it's side-quest time! Hope it's not a disappointment. Looking forward to seeing guesses on what's going on <3

Also fun fact, I got sick with the flu for 9 days. I'm all good now, but I found the timing a bit funny. If I hadn't said the updates would slow down...

FANART! YAY!

theimpurelily drew some adorable NYY/LBH/SY art! I love it so much, I wish I could make them canon in this fic. Maybe that will be a oneshot goal.... I love them

Speaking of Ning Yingying! raindeathlily has drawn an adorable early days, when NYY should have practiced knife safety and SY was asking for Shizun advice <3

And I think it's over, but Raindeathlily made a hilarious poll for what animal Lin Jie would be!

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Pan estate is not as grandiose nor as large that of a noble's, but it's clear that it belongs to a successful family of merchants instead of just some plebs. There is one big house and two small ones for storage, then the stables and a modest garden. All of it encircled by simple stone walls, the street outside busy and loud by the time Shen Yuan drags himself out of bed.

He likes sleeping in, and Binghe is kind enough to let him.

It's a rare treat, and Shen Yuan likes to linger in the drowsy warmth of it the same way he likes to let hard candies melt in his mouth. Shen Qingqiu, a horrible man, is the kind of bastard to crack them with his teeth before spitting out the pieces at you.

He does not let Shen Yuan sleep in. Because he's a bitch.

But there is no Shen Qingqiu here. Only Shen Yuan, Binghe, their horses and the very fancy fish plates.

"I thought he was selling them?" Shen Yuan says, eyeing the food ladden plates that are, indeed, the same they examined yesterday, "or did he realize ninety plates are ridiculous?"

"Of what I overheard, the sister decided to take some as payment for letting him stay with such short notice," Binghe replies, before taking a bite of a very crunchy chili and garlic covered okra, "though Pan Fu protested loudly."

"Ninety fucking plates," Shen Yuan mutters, and puts his pickled plum onto Binghe's plate, "he can do without a few."

"Mmhm," his friend replies, placing a small pile of black mushrooms on top of Shen Yuan's rice. Hell yeah, a fair exchange! He happily accepts the trade, shoving three into his mouth immediately. "Does Yuan want to leave for the market after this?"

"Does Binghe want to do something else first?"

"Pan Fu wished for a second inspection," Binghe says, and Shen Yuan groans. "It won't take that long, and if we comply, the chances of him agreeing to give us some of those tea pets increase. If they are even half the quality as the plates, not even Shizun can reject them."

"Ugh," Shen Yuan says, "I guess. And the whole thing is still suspicious, so might as well." He eyes the other boy. "Binghe thinks so too, doesn't he?"

"I do," his friend nods, "and he was very insistent that we examine them a second time. Considering how nonchalant he seems about everything else, it's…"

"Weird."

“Yes.”

“Alright. So we finish our brunch,” *‘brunch?’* Binghe mouths, “then we inspect our plates, maybe there’s a change after someone has used them? And then we can go and inspect the clean ones where Pan Fu sees us so he can’t say we didn’t do it properly. And *then* we go to the market! Oh, but Lotus and Bao-”

“I already looked them over this morning.”

Shen Yuan smiles.

“Thank you,” he says, and reaches over, swiping his thumb over a grain of rice stuck to the corner of Binghe’s mouth, “Binghe is the best, even when clumsy,” he teases.

Binghe licks his lips, smiling back, cheeks a little pink.

“Thanking Shixiong,” he says, so very warm and soft, and does he *know?* Does his best friend know how he looks, with his eyes like that, eyes so dark yet warmer than anything could ever hope to be, does he know how he looks when he smiles? How the curve of his lips makes his entire face light up, does he *know*–

Shen Yuan averts his eyes and drinks his tea.

“Binghe is the Shixiong,” he says out of habit.

“Sure, Shixiong,” Binghe replies, their little ritual complete.

The plates remain normal.

Shen Yuan and Binghe examine several of them extra carefully as Pan Fu watches, hovering in the doorway like a cloud of anxiety. But no matter how many of the plates they flip around, testing them with their qi or pressing talismans to their glossy fronts to reveal what is hidden–

Nothing.

Everything points to them being normal plates.

The only difference from the day before is the noticeable dip in the amount of them, from which Pan Yingtai claimed some for herself. About ten or so are missing, a noticeable dent but far from enough. That only means there are eighty plates left, which are about fifty too many.

“Nothing at all?” Pan Fu asks, “are you both certain?”

“We cannot find anything amiss,” Shen Yuan repeats once more, wishing they had gone to the market first, “whatever was causing you trouble, sir must have managed to leave behind in Chang Zhe.”

“Haha, such a relief!” Pan Fu replies, rubbing his hands together. Like a raccoon, or a scammer trying to sell a faulty product, “then just! One last favor, such young, strong boys, you are both so strong… could you perhaps nail the box shut?”

Shen Yuan wonders if he heard right.

“We could,” Binghe mildly says, “but did sir not wish to sell them?”

“Of course, of course! But my dear sister, she has already stolen so many of them! And it will take a while before I can open up my store again. It would be a- a relief to this old man if gongzi could just make sure no more plates go missing! Yes! Here!” and the bastard whips out a hammer and a box of nails out of seemingly nowhere, as if he had planned it all along. Which he likely had! Because he’s a fucking *scammer,* preying on the young and innocent to do his dirty work! Fuck!!! “Please, I will reward you both handsomely!”

Oh, good, the man realized he owes them *something* for all the extra labor.

“Very well,” Shen Yuan says, putting on his best nonchalant-face as he accepts the hammer and nails, “then, could sir help us with finding gifts? Twelve of them, and small enough that we could easily bring them home.”

“Twelve?” Pan Fu repeats, the dangling ends of his beard trembling, “such a specific number! What reason is there?”

“Cang Qiong Mountain Sect has twelve peak lords,” Shen Yuan explains as Binghe carefully slides the lid back onto the box, “and as our return has been delayed, this one hoped to gift our elders with something to sooth any inconveniences our delay caused. So if they were matching as well, that would be very nice. Does sir have something like that?”

Pan Fu’s hand-rubbing has turned frenetic. Put a stick between his palms, and he could start a fire. It’s clear that he doesn’t want to give away twelve whole things, no matter how small.

It is also clear that he has demanded more from them than was originally agreed, and that it is his *sister* who is kind enough to house them. Pan Fu looks between their polite smiles, and then musters a smile of his own.

“Of course, of course! It is the least this one can do for such hardworking young men,” he simpers, turning around, eyes frantically scanning the crates stacked all around them in the small room, “what of… ah! Here, yes!”

He grabs a box which seems fancier than the others. This one has a hinge and a proper little lock; it looks like a comically big jewelry box made of dark wood. Pan Fu brings out a tiny key and unlocks it, gesturing for the both of them to look inside.

“This should please even the mightiest of cultivators,” he says.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan breathes, and hears Binghe do the same.

Within it are twelve tea pets.

Tiny, round little things, each one a different type of animal from the zodiac. There is a tiny dragon with the shortest legs he has ever seen; a snake curled up so much that its own nose is barely poking out from its coils. A horse as fat as a cave painting, a rat with tiny, round ears. Each and single one of them are adorable, chubby and the kind of thing Shen Yuan imagines teenage girls would lose their minds over. Fuck, *he* is losing his mind, because- because they are-

“They are alive?” Shen Yuan asks, holding his hand out for the tiny, *moving* porcelain dog to sniff, a stubby tail wagging furiously.

“This one sells only the highest quality! They are made of clay from the borders of the demon realm. It makes them very sturdy as well, so if they wander off a table they won’t break. All one needs to do is pour tea on them at least once every fourth day. Otherwise they might crack or become still as statues.”

“Deal,” Shen Yuan says, no hesitation needed, “this one is certain these will bring joy to the Lords of Cang Qiong Mountain. Thank you, sir.”

And if Shen Qingqiu doesn’t want one, then that’s a win-win, because Shen Yuan would be *happy* to take it off his hands. Delighted! It’s like a ninety-nine chance of successful pet retrieval!

“... but does gongzis truly need twelve?” Pan Fu wheedles, “there are other sets, not as large as these, but *far* more worthy…”

“It’s of utmost importance that they all get a gift each,” Binghe says, because he’s amazing and perfect, and Shen Yuan wishes he could give him a fistbump for going along with it, “we would not wish to show undue favor by only honoring a few of them instead of all.”

“Perhaps they will be impressed enough to visit your store themselves,” Shen Yuan adds as he, with the flick of a finger, sends the nails flying into position.

Showing off never hurts.

Pan Fu gasps. Shen Yuan hides a smile, and snaps one finger to make one nail drive itself into the lid, casually tossing the hammer to Binghe, who catches it. Shen Yuan then repeats it for every nail, until the crate is once more nailed shut. Shen Yuan *could* have put them all in at once, but that wouldn’t have been as cool.

“Very well,” Pan Fu faintly says, “this one would be honored to give the Living Zodiac Set to the Cang Qiong Mountain Sect.”

“We thank you,” they say in unison and offer a bow.

Nailed it.

(he should stop hanging around Wei Qingwei.)

When they open the gate, the sound of the crowded street outside dramatically increases. It's like a physical force, hammering at them as they blink away the shock. They arrived late last night, after all, when this part of Yinnan City was near-empty of people.

It is now the height of activity, and Shen Yuan hesitates in the doorway. He looks back at the house. The servants, though few, are working hard. One is sweeping the courtyard, her long, braided hair swaying with each step until Pan Yingtai's voice calls out for someone to wash the dishes. The broom is put aside before the girl hurries inside, blushing a little when she glances Binghe's way.

Shen Yuan knows it's fine. Binghe's first conquest will be at the conference, not here. And besides, he didn't even look at her. So it's fine.

That's not the problem though.

"Maybe we should go to the market tomorrow," Shen Yuan says, hand pressed against the sun-warmed door.

Binghe's dark eyes examine him. Shen Yuan tries his best to meet them, but can't hold his friend's gaze for long.

"Is it the plates?"

"It's just… something is *weird,* and we can't find it," Shen Yuan blurts out, stooping down to greet a cat when it tries to slink past them, its grey tabby fur glossy and thick. It's warm, too, like the door. It must have been napping in the sun. "Pan Fu is clearly not an honest man, but he's acting so weird about them, I just- is it truly alright for us to go shopping when something might be going on?"

Binghe hunches down with him, hand joining his to pet the cat. It purrs, curving its back, wobbling a little in place as it tries to decide which hand to chase after.

"We nailed the crate shut," Binghe says, "and so far Pan Fu has only told us that the plates returned when separated, always the day after. Does Yuan think he is lying, that there is danger?"

"What does Binghe think?" he asks in return.

The protagonist's gut feeling is always right, after all. Shen Yuan's is more finicky. Sometimes he thinks he got it, and instead he throws up from nerves. Or the flu.

The cat nips at his fingers before it darts past them, apparently satisfied with their attention. Shen Yuan's hand hover in the air after it leaves, bereft, until Binghe grabs it. Warm, as

always. A steady heat that counters Shen Yuan's chronically cold disposition.

"I agree with Yuan that it's weird," Binghe says, "but I'm uncertain what else we could do."

"Stake it out? Ugh, but we're not even getting paid," Shen Yuan groans, slumping against the other, "there's so much work for nothing! Could we even put it in a report?"

"Shizun will have opinions on it," Binghe hums, squeezing his hand.

"He has an opinion for everything," Shen Yuan mutters, squeezing back, "I just want to relax, where he can't see. There's *no* way he trained like this when he was my age, bastard."

For two years now, it's been non-stop. Lift this heavy thing with your qi! Become a pretzel! Move Fu Yue without moving your hands! Move a hundred leaves at once! Make a *wall of air.* Eat more garlic. Run, bitch, run! Day in and day out. Going away on missions, a duty that *should* be grueling work, have become highly desired vacations. That, and whenever Shen Yuan manages to scramble away to visit one of the other peaks if Shen Qingqiu happens to look the other way.

If he finds out they took on a freebie mission, he would do that *judgy face* of his, and then make them both run laps until they drop, before forcing them to have, like, a sword duel or something. And eat the damn chilis as a final K.O punishment.

Those chilis have gotten spicier. Shen Yuan *knows* he swapped them out last month, he thought his tongue would fall out.

"... would Pan Fu risk his sister?" he asks.

"He hasn't mentioned any injuries," Binghe replies. They watch as people pass by, offering smiles whenever one does a double-take, seeing two cultivators crouching in a doorway.

They must look so weird.

"And," Binghe continues, "if the trigger is to separate the set, then it won't be noticed until tomorrow. So I think we can go to the market, and be back before nightfall. Pan Yingtai said we could stay until tomorrow if we wished. By then, we should know if something is wrong."

Shen Yuan sighs.

Binghe is right, of course. Whatever clues there may be, whatever weird little side-quest they stumbled upon, nothing else has happened yet.

The System is quiet, no one has been hurt, the crate is sealed up. Pan Fu was nervous, but he didn't seem terrified. If there is something to find, the cutscene will be triggered upon their return or during the night, because that's just how it always goes in mysteries like this. Going to the market should be fine.

They could get tanghulu. Something sweet before things go wrong.

"Alright," he stands up, pulling Binghe along, "then let's go. What does Binghe want?"

“What do *I* want?”

“I’m going to buy you something,” Shen Yuan decides, “a treat! For taking care of the horses this morning. Don’t fight it.”

Binghe laughs, and they leave hand in hand.

The door closes with a thud behind them.

Luo Binghe knew the moment he saw it, that all was doomed.

If Shen Yuan were to see it, the other boy would use all of his remaining coin to buy as many books as he could carry, and then twice more for Luo Binghe to carry as well. Shen Yuan, at that moment, had been distracted by candied hawthorn and a puppet theater about Yue Qingyuan defeating the last heavenly demon lord. If they had continued to walk, Shen Yuan would not have seen the stall at all.

Luo Binghe also knew that his friend’s eyes would light up if he *did* see it. So he pointed to the stall, and watched Shen Yuan’s face split into a wide smile, green eyes shimmering like jewels before he darted towards it, ink black hair flowing behind him. As always, Luo Binghe followed.

“We need another qiankun pouch,” Shen Yuan now says, “one without heads inside of it.”

The stall before them is sagging under the weight of the books piled upon it. Tomes thicker than Luo Binghe’s head crowd against yellow books squeezed in between aged journals. The stall itself had been tucked away into a little corner, barely visible, the silk traders in front shielding it from view. The old woman manning the stall sits with a smile, eyes blurry with age and skin creased as she idly listens to the two of them talk.

“We only have the one,” Luo Binghe points out, “and we have not seen any cultivators who sell more.”

“There must be someone,” Shen Yuan insists, and holds the stick of tanghulu to Luo Binghe’s lips. He obliges, biting down, hardened sugar cracking, the sour tanginess of hawthorn bursting on his tongue. “There is *always* someone selling qiankun pouches.”

“There is always someone selling *counterfeit* qiankun pouches,” Luo Binghe counters. Shen Yuan huffs, pulling the tanghulu away to take a bite of his own. It’s from the same one which Luo Binghe chose. It clings to the stick, a jagged red line left, now bitten from two sides. A little closer, and Shen Yuan’s lips would have touched where Luo Binghe’s did.

He swallows, and looks down at the growing pile of books in his arms. The title suggests it to be a romantic comedy. A gift for Ning Yingying, or so Shen Yuan will claim when asked. The three of them will likely end up reading it together. They always do.

“Binghe may be right,” Shen Yuan says, picking up another book, “but what if we find one about cursed porcelain? Would that not be a shame, if we can’t buy it only because we lack the space? Perhaps the answers to our problems can be found here.”

“Yuan could put one of the other books back if that were to happen,” Luo Bignhe replies, nodding towards another, “what of that one?”

“Hidden beasts of the world?” Shen Yuan reads the title, caving to his curiosity as he flips it open, “hidden in what way… oh! Orchid mantis! But that’s not a monster, that’s only an insect.”

“It says *giant* orchid mantis.”

“But they don’t exist!” Shen Yuan complains.

He still adds it to the growing pile. Luo Binghe hides his smile against the spine of the book, listening as Shen Yuan continues, speaking of fact versus fiction, folktales versus reality, which insects *do* have giant counterparts. There is a flush to his cheeks the longer he speaks, a breathlessness to his words when he forgets to breathe in between. Stumbling over his own words, just as he does when writing, shortening some and skipping others. A smudge of ink, a stutter over syllables.

Luo Binghe loves him.

The strangest thing of all is that he knows Shen Yuan loves him too.

Not in the same way. He knows that Shen Yuan does not dream of Luo Binghe’s lips, nor of wearing wedding red or to share a bed the way lovers do.

But he knows that Shen Yuan loves him, despite his tainted blood, despite Luo Binghe’s many flaws. Shen Yuan shows it in how he combs through Binghe’s hair every morning and how he undoes his work in the evening with gentle hands. It’s impossible to deny or to forget when Shen Yuan keeps him company as he cooks, when Shen Yuan taunts him into fighting with their brooms when they should be sweeping the stairs. When they sit on the branches of their tree, and Shen Yuan laughs so hard he has to hold onto Luo Binghe or risk falling off.

Doubting that love, whichever shape it may be, would only upset his friend. Shen Yuan does not feed him crumbs of affection. He instead shoves whole plates of love against him, and Luo Binghe is a greedy demon at heart. He takes it all, hoping Shen Yuan knows how much love he holds for him in return.

Demons aren’t inherently greedy, his friend would say.

Then why am I? Luo Binghe wants to ask.

Shen Yuan’s love is selfless, while Luo Binghe’s is selfish. He does not mind it, when Shen Qingqiu calls him Shen Yuan’s mutt. There is no shame in being a loyal pet to someone like Shen Yuan. No one faults a dog for having a favorite person.

“Oh!” his friend crows with delight, “a recipe book! Food from far-off lands… Binghe, we definitely have to get this one!”

“Yuan should finish eating the tanghulu so he can carry books as well,” Luo Binghe replies, hefting his pile up higher, “this humble one is reaching his limit.”

“Binghe shouldn’t lie, he is stronger than me,” Shen Yuan replies, and holds the tanghulu to Luo Binghe’s lips once more. “But fine, help me finish this.”

Luo Binghe wraps his lips around the sliver of hawthorn left from before. It slides off the stick without resistance. There is no hardened sugar coating it anymore, only the pale flesh of the inside bared to the world, tangy as Luo Binghe chews. He licks his lips, chasing the last remains of sweetness to be found.

Shen Yuan is staring at his mouth.

“Did I make a mess?” Luo Binghe wonders. Did he miss a drop of juice, a flake of sugar coating? Will Yuan wipe it away like he did with the rice this morning, using his own hand before eating it himself?

“Hm? Oh, no,” Shen Yuan’s eyes darted away, “I was just- perhaps Binghe is hungry? Shall we find a food stall next, something more filling? Binghe is a growing boy, after all. We can’t live off of sweets.”

“Yuan will always be the tallest one of Qing Jing Peak,” he replies with a smile, “even taller than Shen Qingqiu himself.”

Shen Yuan groans.

“I’m *not!* I can’t be, I think Shizun would cut my feet off to ensure it!”

“This humble Shidi will do his best to defend Shixiong’s feet, if he does not lose them himself on the way home.”

“Is Binghe calling me *clumsy?”*

“Of course not. I would *never,”* he lies.

Shen Yuan scoffs, turning back to the stall and–

Trips.

Luo Binghe laughs so hard he nearly drops the books.

Their final haul amounted to: four pork buns (devoured), a bag of honey nuts (half-finished, future midnight snack), a bag (not qiankun) of passable quality, currently straining at the seams, bulging with the ten books of various sizes that he bought- after having to put five back- two new hair ribbons for Ning Yingying, two more for Binghe, a fan for Shen Qingqiu (to ensure he gets *something* after he rejects the tea pet), a bag of tea leaves for Yue Qingyuan and a much emptier coin pouch.

All in all, not too bad! Shen Yuan figures they can just buy another saddle bag before they leave town, and bam, gifts secured. The box with the tea pets can be secured as well with some good rope and–

Shen Yuan pushes open the gate to the Pan estate, only to nearly step on a cat as it rushes out into the street. He catches a glimpse of grey tabby fur before it's gone, hair on end and hissing.

Not a good sign. That's *never* a good sign.

They stand at the gate for a moment, listening. There is no screaming, no yelling or strange noise. Pan Yingtai steps out of the house, looking frazzled but unharmed and unconcerned. She gives them a nod, and they return it, the gate closing with a thud behind them.

"Is all well?" Binghe asks as they get closer to her.

"Ah, yes, of course. Now that my brother has stopped trying to steal back his *beloved* plates, all is well," Pan Yingtai replies, "thank you for asking. Did you two have a good time at the market? It's one of the best in the region."

"We did, thank you," Shen Yuan politely says, pretending he doesn't see Binghe sniffing the air. It's subtle, and not something anyone else would notice. But Shen Yuan does. Of course he does.

They exchange a few more pleasantries, the words dragging and horrible, impatience gnawing at his insides. After what may well be an eternity, they finally make it back to their room.

"I smelled blood," Binghe says the second the door is closed.

"Blood?" Shen Yuan repeats, "a lot of it?"

"No, just- fresh. From inside the house, in the direction of the kitchen."

"Could it be that someone cut themselves while cooking?"

"It could be," Binghe agrees, putting down the bag of books, leaning it against their bed, "and perhaps someone stepped on that cat's tail."

"But it's two weird things put together, and the plates…"

"It could be nothing."

“But it likely isn’t.”

They both sigh.

“We checked so hard!” Shen Yuan complains, looking over their talismans before stuffing a few of them into his pockets, then some into Binghe’s for good measure, “what can it be? If it’s a cursed item… I mean, should we just send a letter to Lie Jiu Peak? Wan-shishu would like that, right? But then-”

“-Shizun would punish us for handing over a mission to a rival peak,” Binghe finishes, tightening the belt around his waist, ensuring Zheng Yang is secure, then doing the same for Shen Yuan, because Fu Yue is always a little bit slanted, “even if said mission was not planned.”

“And the plates have *fish* on them.”

“The plates have fish on them,” Binghe nods, “if we can figure out what it is, then we could also figure out how it’s hiding so well.”

“And then we can use it for ourselves,” Shen Yuan says, then huffs. “Y’know, for always chasing after fish, we have never been to the sea. That’s just stupid.”

“Maybe if we do well enough at the conference, Shizun will let us go there as a reward,” Binghe says. His smile is soft and a little amused, knowing how silly of an idea it is. Shen Qingqiu doesn’t give *rewards.*

Shen Yuan imagines Binghe by the sea. Sand between his toes, Binghe having to roll up his pants and tie up his sleeves. Binghe’s curly hair wet and clinging to his face, and the way he would laugh when Shen Yuan splashes him and he should stop. He should stop thinking about it, because there is the Immortal Alliance Conference before that.

“That’s such a death flag,” Shen Yuan blurts out instead, “don’t say that right before we try to track down some cursed plates.” Binghe won’t die, but what about *him?*

Binghe’s eyes sharpens.

“Does Yuan have a suspicion?” he asks, staring at him intently. It’s flattering; Binghe always seems to think that Shen Yuan knows something more, something useful. The way the protagonist, his *best friend,* always trusts him to have a plan–

It’s a heady feeling. One Shen Yuan can’t help but bask in, just a bit.

Just for now.

While Binghe is still all his.

“None,” he reluctantly admits, “but we should track down the blood first, crate second. Whoever is hurt could be trying to hide it. And- Meng Mo doesn’t know anything, right?”

Binghe's face twitches. It does a whole journey, a road trip all on its own before it settles on something strained. Shen Yuan wants to pinch his cheeks, for no reason at all.

"He has made a few… observations, about our host," Binghe finally says.

"Disrespectful ones?"

"Very."

"Ew."

"But not about Yuan," Binghe reassures him.

"Well, of course he hasn't," Shen Yuan says, making sure his wrist bracers are secure, "I'm not a girl."

"... right."

"Ready to go?"

Binghe breathes out, then in. He straightens, steadying himself. Shen Yuan watches. It's not wrong of him to admire it. It's like watching Binghe reaching out to put on the protagonist's halo, shedding the guise of *best friend* and suddenly becoming a *hero.*

Anyone would let their eyes linger on that.

"Ready," Binghe says.

Shen Yuan smiles and opens the door like he would for a dainty maiden, and laughs when Binghe pokes him in the side for it. He still leads the way, as a hero should, eyes intent and steps confident.

As always, Shen Yuan follows close behind.

Binghe is right; the smell of blood comes from the kitchen. The entrance looms before them, foreboding with its ominous *What-If.* Even if Binghe said it didn't smell like a lot of blood, it might change the moment they step inside. They can't sense anything from outside, though. No demonic qi surges, there are no ghostly whispers for their ears to pick up on, no screaming for help.

They step inside, bracing for the worst.

At first glance, there is nothing wrong. There are plates drying on a stand and some are still piled up on the side, ready to be washed as well. They must be from the dinner the two of

them missed while at the market. Shen Yuan can see the fish paintings on them, glimmering in the sunlight that shines through the window.

The rest of the kitchen looks tidy. Dried herbs and garlic hang from the ceiling, the knives are clean and tucked away where they belong. The only thing that stands out is the lone person inside of the kitchen; the girl from before, the one with the long braids. She is currently trying to wrap cloth around one hand, hissing with frustration as she fails to tie the knot. Blood drops fall to the floor.

Shen Yuan clears his throat, startling her into looking up.

“Oh! Master cultivators!” she gasps, and offers a clumsy bow that unravels the rest of the wrappings. She blushes as she bends to pick them up, fumbling as she does. “This one apologizes, is- is there anything this one can help with?”

“Perhaps we should ask that,” Shen Yuan says, stepping forward, holding out one hand. “May I?”

“Ah? Oh, no, I wouldn’t- this one wouldn’t want to get master cultivator dirty,” she protests, “let this one wrap it, and then I can be of service!”

“Please let me help,” Shen Yuan says, kneeling down to meet her eyes, “our hands are important tools, are they not? It would be a shame to leave it be, when I can offer assistance.”

The girl falters.

“He is very good at healing,” Binghe says, “please, it would ease our souls if Miss let us help.”

Shen Yuan doesn’t have to turn around to know he is smiling; he can see it in how the girl blushes even more than before, her eyes going all gooey-soft, the way womens’ eyes tend to do around Binghe.

Not that Shen Yuan can blame them or anything! He is well aware of the power his friend wields. It’s just… she’s not even a future wife.

That’s rude of him. She’s a living and breathing person. One who is slowly holding out her hand for him to inspect, even though he is a stranger that she hasn’t exchanged one word with until now. It’s not her fault that Binghe is literally the most handsome boy in the world.

“Thank you,” Shen Yuan says, and carefully tilts her hand to get a better look at the wound. It’s not deep, which is good. The wound is bleeding steadily, but as long as it’s treated, she won’t be in danger from bleeding out. Maybe if she had been left alone, there would be a risk of infection.

But he’s here, so it’s fine.

“How did you get hurt?” Binghe asks, peering down as Shen Yuan focuses. Qi dipping inside of her veins, slowing the blood flow, nudging the flesh and muscle to heal. The girl doesn’t have a golden core, or even a speck of cultivation. It means he can’t use her energy to heal

her. But that's fine. Shen Yuan has plenty of qi to go around, and the knowledge on how to use it.

"It's… it's embarrassing. This one cut herself while washing the dishes, I let my mind drift," she says as she shivers, watching in awe as the bleeding stops, the wound shrinking before her eyes.

Except–

"You cut yourself?" Shen Yuan asks.

"Yes, master cultivator."

Binghe peers into the basin. Shen Yuan can't see it from where he is kneeling, but it doesn't matter. He is certain there won't be any sharp pieces hidden inside the dirty water.

Because the wound isn't like a cut at all. It curves down the girl's palm, an arc that stops short of her wrist. It's as if something *clawed* at her. Especially the inside; Shen Yuan can feel how uneven it is, his qi mending the edges together. He has healed plenty of these kinds of wounds on himself and others. Claws and fangs tear at flesh in a way that sharp tools can't, leaving traces behind.

"Does Miss know what she cut herself on?" Binghe asks, and Shen Yuan lets go of her hand. A thin red line is all that remains, but it's best to let the body heal that by itself. He doesn't want to accidentally make the scar tissue too thick.

"Thank you… thank you, master cultivator."

"I'm glad I could be of help," he replies, and she smiles at him with gratitude, before she remembers Binghe's question. She stands up, brushing herself off, then dries off the bloodstains still on her skin.

"I was washing a plate, I… I must have broken it without noticing, or perhaps there is a knife I forgot about?"

She doesn't sound sure. Or maybe she is just shy, sidling up to Binghe's side like she is, peering up at him through her long eyelashes. Shen Yuan gets up as well, stepping in between them to look into the basin. It's fine. She's not a future wife, he's just saving them all time. Who wants a random romance plot line that won't lead anywhere? No one!

"This one can only see a plate," Binghe says, which, yeah. Same. There is just a plate, at the bottom of the basin. The water makes it look like the fish painted on it is moving, but it's just a trick of the eye.

But there is *definitely* something going on.

Binghe picks it up, water dripping. There is no blood on it, no jagged pieces, no sharp corners. It looks like all the other plates before. Beautiful and innocent, no danger to anyone. Shen Yuan is half-tempted to smash it onto the floor, just to see if something will finally happen.

He doesn't. Barely.

"Oh," the girl says, "is- is something wrong?"

"Don't mind us," Shen Yuan says, "we tend to worry about the smallest things, and it's our duty to ensure no harm falls to those around us." He offers a smile. "But if Miss thinks she is in need of help, don't hesitate to call for us. We will be staying until tomorrow, after all."

The girl's face is *really* red now. Shen Yuan wonders what face Binghe is making, to make her blush like that.

When he takes a peek, Binghe smiles back at him, which answers that. Shen Yuan is used to his smiles, but even then, they still take him by surprise at times. He clears his throat and turns away, hoping his cheeks didn't turn pink.

"However, we must make our leave now," he says, "but don't forget, Miss, if you need help- just call out. We will hear."

"This one thanks master cultivator," she replies, tugging at one of her braids in a very cutesy, girly way. Fluttering her eyelashes too. Laying it on thick, aren't you! "Did master cultivators come here to ask for dinner?"

"We already ate, do not worry," Shen Yuan says, "we-" fuck, what *can* he tell her? He doesn't want to cause panic! And Binghe's ability to sniff things out isn't exactly normal, not even for cultivators. It was considered more *noble* to enhance one's hearing or sight, not one's sense of smell.

"We were on our way to the stables," Binghe says, "and became distracted. We will take our leave now."

Shen Yuan could kiss him!

But he won't.

They bid their farewells and leave, the girl blushing the whole time, shamelessly trying to catch Binghe's attention. It's a relief to get away, more so when Binghe's polite mask drops, returning to the focus of before, his dark eyes narrowing like slivers of obsidian as he thinks. It's proof that his Binghe didn't waver, even with a cute girl so obviously flirting with him.

"Shall we go and check on the box?" Shen Yuan suggests once they're out of earshot, hurrying towards the courtyard, "that was *not* a cut, Binghe. It was like something had clawed at her."

"Should we really leave her alone with the plates then?" Binghe asks, looking back, "there were ten of them, what if it gets worse?"

"What else can we do? Binghe knows how some creatures become *more* dangerous when they sense fear, not less. Remember when we ran into a flock of Crying Grey Owls?"

Tiny, mournful little things that were perfectly harmless and scared to approach; *unless* they sensed fear. Then they swarmed together, eager to claw and bite and feed. To a cultivator, there was nothing to worry about. They were small, fluffy things with stubby limbs and big eyes that glowed orange. They couldn't even fly, only named after owls because of their round, white faces and tiny little beaks. But if a civilian happened to run into even a single one while alone in the woods…

To no one's surprise, they often ate children.

"If this thing is like that, and we make her scared…"

"Yuan is right," Binghe says, but he can't hide his frustration. Shen Yuan can't blame him. Leaving a harmless girl alone with those plates? It makes his skin crawl. But what could they have used as an excuse? Half of the plates were still dirty, they couldn't just grab them and run for it! That would raise suspicion.

"Pan Fu never mentioned injuries."

Shen Yuan blinks.

"Binghe is right," he says, echoing the other boy, "and yet it happened *now.* Why now, not back then? What is the difference? Unless he is hiding something."

"We both know he is," Binghe wryly says.

"Obviously. But what could it be…"

They leave the house, wooden floors replaced by the stone courtyard. Lotus and Bao both neigh at them, and Shen Yuan promises himself to give them treats later. After they check the crate.

The door to the storage creaks when they open it. The inside is dark, only slivers of light making it through the tiny window at the back, most of it blocked off by all the boxes. Shen Yuan snaps his fingers, lighting the lantern by the wall.

Nothing is amiss.

Not even the crate itself.

Still firmly shut, the nails from that morning still keeping it together. Pan Fu even added the useless rope to it, wrapping it around the box like a talisman. Shen Yuan pulls out a few of his own, slapping them onto the box. The script glows when it activates, but nothing burns. So nothing is wrong. Fuck. Back to square one! Maybe square two? They *know* something is wrong, just not what, where or when! That's almost an improvement, if one were to squint.

"This is very frustrating," Binghe says.

Shen Yuan chokes on a laugh.

“No, what?” he says, dragging a hand down his face, “how could Binghe say such a thing! I don’t know what you’re talking about.” They both giggle, half-hysterical.

And then they both sigh. Groan, really. Because it *is* frustrating.

“I’ll put up talismans by all the exits,” Binghe says, eyeing the door, the window. A tiny hole that needs patching. “If something enters, we will know. Perhaps we could spend the night in the stables.”

“Do we have enough of those? Or is it the *anything* enters talismans?” Shen Yuan asks, “should I go and tell the household to not enter at all? I don’t trust Pan Fu to not sneak in otherwise.”

“No, it should be fine. Can Yuan help?”

“Of course I’ll help! And- and we will sleep in the stables. Just to be sure.” He grimaces. “It would be selfish to sleep in bed, when something might happen. The stables are much closer.”

“Stables it is,” Binghe nods, and they get to work.

It’s a quick thing, really. Quicker than what follows. Time always passes at a snail’s speed whenever one must wait. Waiting for something dangerous makes no difference, especially at night. Doing so out in the stables, among the hay and horses, doesn’t help at all.

Bao is warm against his back. The horse’s neck is curved, head resting in Shen Yuan’s lap. He plays with the tuft of white bangs, cut short by one of the younger disciples at Xi Jiao Peak. Against his other side is Binghe, half-asleep, head against his shoulder.

Lotus likes to stand up when sleeping in strange places. So diligent. Shen Yuan’s own eyes are tired, but he couldn’t fall asleep even if he wanted to. Something about the hay, the smell of horses… it reminds him of when he traveled to Cang Qiong Mountain for the first time. When he would crawl into carts and hope no one would catch him, or hide inside piles of hay and straw and do his best to not sneeze.

It had been too far to walk the whole way.

Binghe isn’t fully asleep either. He is drowsy and snuffling against Shen Yuan, like a puppy burrowing into its favorite blanket. But he’s still awake. It’s the only reason Shen Yuan hasn’t done something stupid and cliché, heart wobbling dangerously in his chest whenever Binghe lets out a sleepy little sigh.

But perhaps he did fall asleep.

In the very next moment, his eyes snap open as the talismans in front of them burst into blue flames, revealing that something has entered the storage. They scramble to their feet, Binghe unsheathing Zheng Yang, Shen Yuan grabbing onto Fu Yue’s hilt but not yet drawing it.

The door is ajar; they slam it open, Shen Yuan sending out orbs of spiritual flames to light the dark space. The crate is–

Open.

Or, no. The lid has been *clawed* open. Half of it has been torn off, jagged pieces of wood pointing in all directions, splinters littering the floor. Shen Yuan lets go of Fu Yue, instead drawing out a talisman as Binghe carefully circles the crate.

Nothing bursts out. Not even when they get close enough to look inside of it, bracing for a jumpscare.

There are only plates.

“Fuck,” Shen Yuan hisses, straightening back up from where he had hunched over the crate. The tips of his fingers are tingling. He has to shake his hands out to get rid of the feeling. “Then where the fuck *is it!?”*

“Yuan.”

“What?” Shen Yuan whirls back around to Binghe, who is still staring into the crate, “did Binghe find something?”

“There are more plates.”

“What?”

“There were ninety last we counted,” Binghe says, eyes darting up and down, left and right. Counting. “Eighteen bowls, eighteen teacups, ninety plates.”

“And then Pan Yingtai took ten,” Shen Yuan says, daring to get closer, “did they return? How did Pan Fu *not* notice them returning to the store, if they do it like this? How–”

“No,” Binghe cuts him off, “there are more than before that.”

He feels nauseous. Shen Yuan swallows, knowing he has to ask, to say it outloud. He looks at the box, the plates piled high, looking undisturbed. A sharp contrast against the splintered wood.

“How many are there?” he finally asks.

“One-hundred,” Binghe says, “there are exactly one-hundred plates.”

Chapter End Notes

SY: Okay, so, the zodiac tea pets are PERFECT. But there's a problem.
LBH: What is it?
SY: Do we give them in the order of the zodiac? Because if so, Yue-ge gets the rat, and Shizun...
LBH: The ox.

SY: He will see it as an insult! I know he will! But if we fuck up the order-
LBH: I think we just give them in the right order. Less... risk.
SY: Of death. Yeah. Wait, who gets the dragon?
LBH: Qi Qingqi.
SY: Not Liu Qingge???
LBH: He gets the horse!
SY: Fitting. Because he kicked you in the face.

YAY MORE THINGS HAPPENING :D
gosh I wonder what's going on!! (teehee)

Thank you all for being so patient, I hope you're having a good summer! I can't wait for vacation, it's so close yet so far... I'll eat so much ice cream.
But at least "The Summer Hikaru Died" is soon out!!! LETS GO!!! (very excited! queer horror anime!!! OMNOM)

Also, I hope the link shows up in related works, but ImpureLily wrote an adorable "what if" oneshot with NYY/LBH/SY, taking place after Shen Yuan braided her hair! I adore it, it's SO cute.

Fanart <3

Raindeathlily has drawn so much!! SQQ snatching the manual , LBH and SY fighting LQG and the the aftermath

Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Yuan should go back inside."

"What? No!"

"Whatever this is, it has claws and is strong enough to break wood," Luo Binghe says, "there may be someone injured, and we won't know if we both stay here. So Yuan should go inside and see if anyone needs help."

"I'm not leaving Binghe alone with it," Shen Yuan protests, grabbing his wrist, "that's so stupid! What if something happens? What if *you* get hurt while I'm not here?"

"I'll keep my distance until you're back," Luo Binghe promises, "but we can't leave it alone, and Yuan is the one who knows the healing arts."

And it would be safer for Shen Yuan to be somewhere else. But he knows better than to say as much; knows that his friend would become as stubborn as a mule, as immovable as a mountain, while giving Luo Binghe's ear a painful pinch for daring to send him away.

It is better if Shen Yuan feels useful.

"Fuck," his friend hisses, hand sliding down to squeeze Luo Binghe's, "fine. Fine, I'll go and make sure no one has been eaten. But if the… the plates or whatever bursts out and tries to eat your face, then Binghe won't fight it alone, alright? It is important to protect your face," he insists, "there is only one like it."

"Ah, then I will work hard to keep it safe, if it pleases Yuan so much."

Shen Yuan rolls his eyes. In the low light of the shed, Luo Binghe thinks he can see a dusting of pink across Shen Yuan's cheeks. If there is any face which needs to be protected, it is Shen Yuan's. Luo Binghe smiles back, and gains a reluctant one in return.

"Binghe should protect all of himself," Shen Yuan adds, slowly letting go, fingers dragging away like lingering brushstrokes, "and Binghe won't do anything too heroic while I'm gone."

"I'll be very well-behaved," he says.

Shen Yuan hesitates for only a moment longer. Then he leaves, using qinggong to move quick and quiet. It is like watching a breeze depart.

Luo Binghe turns back to the crate.

Nothing has changed. The crate is still clawed open, the plates within remain at one-hundred and there is no ghostly nor demonic qi. And yet, something lit the talismans, the script turned

to ash. He looks at the crate. The spirit fire which Shen Yuan lit gives it an ominous glow, a flicker of blue and shadows. Something tore through wood to get inside.

What else can do such a thing?

Divine beasts can be destructive, but they do not act in this manner. Luo Binghe thinks back to the girl's bloodied hand. Divine beasts do not harm without being provoked, and it had been obvious that it was the plates which had injured her. A servant would not thoughtlessly break their master's possessions, especially not a well-treated one. Pan Yingtai has not seemed like a cruel mistress in their short time here. Could it be a corrupt divine being? Caught while in the process of turning demonic?

Luo Binghe gingerly picks up one of the plates and presses his qi against it. He is not as skilled with it as Shen Yuan, but he knows enough. But just like before, he gets nothing back. No divine qi, nothing unnatural. So what could it be if not–

Unless it wasn't something unnatural.

If it was a common beast, then their previous attempts wouldn't have picked up on anything. They have been trained to detect the abnormal; if they cast out their qi and could detect every living being within the radius, not only demonic or ghostly ones, it would be a useless skill to learn. It would only leave them overwhelmed and confused.

But there *are* common beasts who can hide. Had he not found a book on it, and had Yuan not bought it? *"Hidden beasts of the world."* Some animals had magic, even without being demonic or divine. Like the abnormally long-lived spider at the dorms. The one that Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying both obsessed over, claiming it acted strange.

Could it truly be that simple?

Luo Binghe puts the plate back. His hand remains unharmed. Did the plate injure the servant girl to defend itself? Or was there another reason? Why won't it injure him, now, when he is alone? What is different from now and then? He is handling it with care, he isn't trying to clean it, to scrub off stains. Was it the water?

He steps away from the crate. Luo Binghe glances towards the open door, and can see the well out in the courtyard. If he is quick with it, he could fill a bucket with water well before Shen Yuan returns. If there is a threat, it will be triggered before Shen Yuan can be caught in the crossfire.

Ah, but he promised to wait.

He wraps his hand around Zheng Yang's handle. As always, there is the burst of joyful warmth. Dancing sunlight and sparks of fire, never burning enough to hurt. Zheng Yang is eager to be of use, to be wielded for a just cause. To prove its worth. *Their* worth. It urges him on.

It would be so *quick.* Yuan would not blame him too harshly, if Luo Binghe tested a theory before he came back. It might not even work, and then his friend would only get a good laugh

from seeing Luo Binghe drenching expensive porcelain with well-water.

But he promised.

Luo Binghe exhales and lets go of Zheng Yang.

He can be patient. Does Shen Qingqiu not always tell them to not be so impulsive? To not act like those of Bai Zhan Peak, rushing in without a second thought? Luo Binghe has had plenty of practice to reign in his impulses. He always has to be the steady one between Shen Yuan and Ning Yingying. A box of vicious plates shouldn't change this.

So he leans against the doorway and waits.

When Shen Yuan returns, he smiles brightly upon seeing Luo Binghe whole and unharmed. That, if anything, tells him he made the right choice to wait.

The moon makes Shen Yuan's hair shine like ink as he runs across the courtyard to reach him. Luo Binghe grins and catches him as he trips, steadying his friend who pinches his cheek for the nerve of silently laughing at his clumsiness.

"There was a rock!" Shen Yuan insists.

"Of course," Luo Binghe teases, pressing his fingers to where his cheek still tingles, pretending to pout up at the other, "this one apologizes. Ah, but is it safe to presume all is well?"

His friend nods.

"No bodies, no blood. Everyone were still breathing, though I only took a quick peek into the rooms. I didn't want to risk waking anyone before we knew more." Shen Yuan says, and peeks into the shed, one hand on Luo Binghe's shoulder as he has to lean over him. "And here? Nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened. But… I have an idea."

Shen Yuan looks down at him. A pleased smile blooms across his face. Soft and unsurprised, as if he already knew that Luo Binghe would find an answer while he was gone. It is a smile he only ever gives Binghe. It makes warmth swell in his chest, seeping into his lungs, into his very soul. Luo Binghe is suddenly very aware of how close they stand. One hand is still on Shen Yuan's waist from when he steadied him. Like this, one could mistake them for lovers.

"Tell me about it," Shen Yuan says, and Luo Binghe does.

Of course the fucking book would have the answer.

It only made sense! Binghe spoke with a shady merchant and they were given a mystery to solve; clues would be dropped, some subtle, some not. And then, as all mysteries tended to do, a random lore drop would pop up when you needed it the most.

“I might be wrong,” Binghe says as they sit down on the bed. They are both tired, eyes feeling gritty and sore, but still too alert to relax. Shen Yuan isn’t the only one who is keeping an ear out for any sudden screaming. They left the shed, left those damn plates behind and unsupervised, but it should be fine. The household is awake now; hustling and bustling, nothing out of place. They can afford to leave the plates unsupervised. Just for a moment.

“Or Binghe is right,” Shen Yuan replies, yawning as he digs the book out of the pile that he bought yesterday, “and *I* will be proven right that all disciples should learn how to cast out their qi for *all* creatures, not just demonic or ghostly ones. It’s so stupid that Xi Jiao Peak is the only one which teaches how to track common beasts with that method. Look at us! If Binghe is right, then we could have solved this before we even *arrived.”*

Stupid fucking peak rivalry.

Sometimes, people were right when they accused Cang Qiong Mountain of just being a bunch of tiny sects pretending to be a big one. Even Qing Jing Peak had their own little secrets. Oh the *horror* if any other peak learned how to wield battle music as well as Qing Jing Peak could! No, they couldn’t let *that* happen. Shen Yuan shudders to think about how much knowledge was wiped out in the original story; Ning Yingying and Liu Mingyan were hardly the most knowledgeable.

Their Shijie was… well, she was who she was, and Liu Mingyan in the original had been far too busy getting revenge for her brother. She had no time to focus on the secrets of textiles and whatever the fuck else the all-girl peak did. Some of the older guys liked to whisper that it was totally dual cultivation techniques, which was stupid and something the horny idiots of the forums would have drooled over.

Shen Yuan had heard enough about Qian Cao Peak to be traumatized for life, thanks. If any peak was a master of dual cultivation–

Ah, the book. He grabs it, Binghe keeping the pile steady so that they won’t all fall over. The book itself is wrapped in soft leather. It’s not stiff, but instead kind of flappy. Like a magazine. The title is sprawled over it in too fancy brush strokes, nearly unreadable.

The giant orchid mantis is one of the first things it mentions. Shen Yuan knows that it’s a fake animal. Orchid mantis existed, yes, but not *giant* ones. It’s not very promising for a false entry to be the first one.

“Even a blind cat can find a dead mouse,” Binghe says, leaning against him. Their shoulders press together. “And Yuan will know what is fake, won’t he?”

“Ah, well,” Shen Yuan mutters, scanning the pages, “Binghe knows I’ve mostly read about demons.”

“Yuan will know,” his friend insists.

“Well, if *Binghe* says so,” he smiles, flips the page and–

Clay dragon.

Shen Yuan stares. The painting is beautiful, with bold strokes of brown and muddied red, sharp slashes of black to highlight the shape of it. It looks like a classic dragon. A long, serpentine body and four short legs, a mane and horns. He recognizes it. He has never seen it before, of course, but the name…

“The clay dragon is, despite its name, a common beast that has no relation to the divine dragons. They can be found by the demonic border,” Binghe reads aloud, “the size of an ox, the clay dragon is a master at camouflaging itself by the muddied banks of the river which runs along the border. Even its eggs look like rocks, so it is an easy mistake to invade their nests by accident. A mistake that can lead to death.”

“I’ve read about this,” Shen Yuan blurts out, “the- the clay. The dragons do something to it when building their nests, as well as using the clay to strengthen their eggs. It’s popular to use for small enchantments, even the eggshells… that must be where Pan Fu got the tea pets from. He mentioned they were made of clay from the borders, right?”

“So the plates might be as well,” Binghe says, “and like how the tea pets need tea to function without breaking, then perhaps it is not that the water makes the plates defensive, but instead it wakes them up.”

Binghe’s brows dip downwards, thinking. Shen Yuan rests his hand against the book, holding it open. But he can’t make himself look away from Binghe. Watching as his friend’s eyes grow focused, glinting like a starry night sky. His friend, the genius. The protagonist whose IQ is always the highest in the room. Already figuring out the mystery, having already found a possible answer before they even opened the book. Truly, how could anyone not admire him?

To not want him for themselves.

Shen Yuan’s heart does a weird little wiggle in his chest. His fingers curl against the page, and for just a moment he thinks about pressing his lips to the furrow between Binghe’s brows.

“The question is how it duplicates,” Binghe says, “it does not mention anything of the sort here. And if the plates were merely enchanted…”

“Then we should have found out when we examined them,” Shen Yuan finishes, shoving idiotic daydreams away for the problem at hand, his heart beating a step too quickly within, “So it must still be some kind of beast, related to that area. As for the duplication- I mean, it can’t just make that happen from *nothing.* It needs some kind of… energy or fuel or something. No one can create mass from *nothing.”*

Binghe straightens.

“Blood.”

“Blood? What- oh!”

“We know that blood can be a powerful ingredient, even if it is only a few drops. Pan Fu said it was always the buyers who complained about the plates disappearing and returning to the store,” Binghe points out, “and they were too expensive for those buyers to be without servants. No one would notice if servants were always injured while cleaning them.”

If anything, the servants would be punished for dirtying the new and expensive dishes if they were found out. They would try to hide it from their masters, blame their injuries on something else.

The back of his neck feels itchy. Shen Yuan fingers twitch.

“We need to examine the girl again,” he decides.

“Wait,” his friend says, taking the book, “the natural enemy of clay dragons. Has Yuan heard of it?”

“Ah, no. What is it? Something with fire perhaps?”

“The book calls them mimics.”

Mimics? Like- what, like treasure chests in fantasy stories? The things with teeth and tongues and an eagerness to eat adventurers with greedy fingers? Why the fuck would a *mimic* be the natural enemy of a goddamn dragon? That made no sense, and had never been mentioned in the original either. Trapped chests, yes, but *mimics?* Sure, Airplane would totally put them into the original, but making them the natural enemy of some clay dragon was a bit too far out there! Even for him!

“If they are called mimics, they will probably be in the book as well, since it implies they can hide well,” Shen Yuan says, “can Binghe read it on the way? I want to examine the girl from yesterday as quickly as possible. If the plates used her blood to reproduce, then she can’t be feeling good.”

They find her hiding by the stables.

Curled up in a shadowy corner, the girl is hunched over her hand and making short, gasping sounds that reminds him of choking on air. His own throat feels tight at the mere sound, like a snare pulling closed.

When she sees them, she flinches.

“Hello,” Shen Yuan says, kneeling by her side as Binghe remains behind him. Positioned so that they are shielded from view, if anyone else were to appear behind the stables. Diligent. “Does Miss need help?”

She looks at him, eyes brimming with tears. Her hand remains out of view, clutched to her chest. It’s the same one he healed yesterday, and it is painfully obvious where the problem lies. Did the wound somehow reopen? Shen Yuan knows he healed it perfectly. It should have been fine. And yet.

“My… my hand…” she stutters, then stops. Tears run down her face, and Shen Yuan tries his best to smile soothingly.

“May I see?” he asks.

For a long moment, she doesn’t answer. There is the sound of people working, the chatter from the courtyard, someone cleaning the stables. A bird sings from the tree near them. They are close enough to the wall that they can hear the busy street outside.

Her braids are half-done. Or perhaps she never undid them last night, and then forgot to fix it after she woke up. Yesterday, they were neat. Now they are uneven and lumpy, escaping containment. It makes sense. If her hand is hurt, then how could she hope to make herself presentable? But could she then not ask for help from the others? Back at Lady Jia’s, they often helped each other get ready. This place seems… kind, in comparison. Surely someone would help her, if asked. Surely she isn’t all alone? Pan Yingtai seemed nice.

“It’s gross,” the girl finally chokes out.

“Let this one be the judge of that,” Shen Yuan says.

She holds out her hand. Shen Yuan takes it into his own hands, mind distant as he examines it. Presses against soft skin, feeling it shift the way wrinkled skin tends to do. It is soft and reminds him of his grandma’s hands. Which is wrong. That’s not-

There is the red line from the wound he healed the other day. The claw mark, still looking fresh, exactly as he had left it. But the girl’s hand itself doesn’t belong to a young girl at all. It truly is wrinkled, more fitting for a woman decades older. When Shen Yuan sinks his qi into it, the life force is strangled. *Leaving,* and whatever is doing it is spreading. It is still only in her hand, but he can see the signs. If left alone, this… *virus* will spread up her arm. To the rest of her body.

Her very life force is leaving her.

Is this truly the work of a common beast? This is more akin to demonic cultivation. The parasitic kind, the ones Shen Yuan has only heard whispers of because no one wants to talk about such *awful* things around Shen Qingqiu’s disciples. He has never seen anything like it. Mu Qingfang only lets him heal physical injuries.

This? He doesn’t know how to reverse this. All he can hope is that it will stop, once they kill the thing doing it. But she will still have a grandma-hand.

“Can you heal it?” the girl asks, voice trembling.

“... we will find the cause,” Shen Yuan replies, avoiding her question, which is hardly better than lying. He lets go, the girl quick to hide her hand away again. Her eyes are going to be swollen from how much she is crying. He almost tells her to keep hydrated. “But for now, rest. If your mistress tells you off, then send her to me, and I’ll explain. Alright?”

She nods.

Standing up, it feels wrong to just leave her like that. But what else can he do? What can *they* do, staying there? If her hand already looks like that within half a day, then is that why Pan Fu decided to crash at his sister’s? Servants go unnoticed, sure, but if they have what seems to be a curse that’s aging them…

“Why the fuck didn’t he just break the plates,” Shen Yuan hisses as they slip back into the storage, “or leave them behind! What kind of insane bastard brings something like this along everywhere he goes? To his own *sister’s* place!?”

“I couldn’t see what happened to her,” Binghe says, closing the door behind them. He does it more quietly than Shen Yuan would have. “How bad is it?”

“It’s still leeching from her,” Shen Yuan snarls, “her hand looks like it’s decades older than the rest of her, and it’s going to spread! So whatever the fuck is going on, we *have* to kill it, if only to save her and whoever else got affected! How many have died just because he wanted to earn some coin? Bastard.”

He drags his hands through his hair, making a mess of it. He should have tied it out of the way, not leave it half-up. Shen Yuan yanks his hand out when his fingers catch on a knot.

“I don’t know how to heal this, Binghe. Maybe if we took her with us home, but how would we explain it? We’re not supposed to take on missions without approval. And even if we did, it’s been less than a day and her hand is already looking like *that.* I don’t know what to…” he trails off.

Binghe isn’t looking at him, but at the book.

“What is it?” he asks, stepping closer, “did Binghe find something?”

“Would Yuan say it’s leeching off of her like it’s a parasite?” Binghe asks, tilting the book so that Shen Yuan can see. It’s on the page about clay dragons. At least, that is what it first looks like. But the art is different. The dragon is positioned differently, and it has no legs. A snake? No, it has the same kind of antlers the clay dragon had.

“Mimic,” Shen Yuan reads the title outloud. The thing that was the clay dragon’s enemy. The art depicts them looking near identical, sans legs. It’s drawn in a viper-about-to-strike stance, which looks pretty cool.

“Look,” Binghe says, leaning against him, pointing, “it says here that they lay their eggs in clay dragon nests. Only one per nest, though. And then the fake egg-”

“-leech the life out of the other ones, and replace each egg with… a copy? What the fuck,” Shen Yuan mutters, tugging the book closer, until he and Binghe’s heads are pressed together, “so the mimic is a brood parasite? A magical brood parasite that *duplicates* its victims? That’s fucked up.”

“I’ve not heard that term before,” Binghe muses, “could Yuan explain?”

“Uh, a brood parasite is like… like a cuckoo bird. They lay their eggs in other bird’s nests, so that they don’t have to take care of them. And the cuckoo hatchling pushes the others out of the nest so that the parents will only feed it, making sure it gets big. That, and they just look bigger in general, so of course the parents will feed them more. Bigger hatchlings have a higher chance of survival.”

“Oh,” Binghe says, his smile falling, “that sounds… sad.”

“I guess.” He had always found it fascinating. How did the cuckoo birds grow up to know what they were? How did they know they were parasites, to seek out their mates among other cuckoo birds?

But it *was* sad.

And also made *no sense in this setting!*

“I’m going to yell at Shang-shishu when I see him,” Shen Yuan decides. Binghe perks up, eyes sparkling. Shen Yuan pinches his cheek.

“Can I watch?” Binghe asks, letting him.

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan huffs, and then turns to glare at the crate and the plates within, “but if this is actually a mimic’s nest, why do they look like *plates?”*

Fish plates! Gorgeous, expensive plates with fish! It sure as fuck didn’t look like a fish in the book! What kind of weird-ass animal made *egg plates.* Stupid. He was going to kick Airplane in the shin and maybe his balls, too. This whole plot line was stupid and the girl was going to have a grandma-hand *forever.*

“Are they actual eggs?”

“What?”

“If we crack them, will there be a yolk?” Binghe asks, putting down the book to instead pick up a plate. “They don’t feel like eggs. They are too cold and stiff… so if I were to crack one, would there be yolk?”

“Don’t touch them!” Shen Yuan yelps, snatching it out of Binghe’s hands, “what if it bites you and takes *your* life force!?”

“Then Yuan shouldn’t be holding it either,” Binghe argues, snatching it back, “this one is only wondering.”

“Does Binghe plan to cook the eggs if there is yolk?” he asks incredulously, “what does it matter? Put it back!”

“Because, Yuan, the book says nothing about what happens when it hatches. And it is unclear whether or not it makes more actual eggs, or if all of these plates are only copies.”

“Oh, fuck.”

Binghe was right. The book itself was clearly unreliable, but had enough truth in it that they couldn’t write it off as nonsense.

There were now one-hundred plates- and what if they were all mimics? When would they hatch? What if there was only *one,* and if so, how would they break the right plate? If they broke all of them and it turned out that only one was a danger, then Pan Fu, the bastard, would totally demand compensation. And if they were made from magical clay from the *borders of the demon realm,* then of course they would be insanely expensive!

Shen Qingqiu would kill them.

Possibly flay them and sell the skin, use the winnings to pay off the debt. Fuck. Were their skins even worth enough to do that??? Binghe’s maybe, but *Shen Yuan’s!?* Definitely not!

“And,” he says, realizing more unhelpful things, “if we break the plate, it might leech more from the girl to repair the damage… making her affliction worse. We’re stuck. I can’t- even if we were to send off a paper bird to ask for assistance, it wouldn’t get there in time, if at all. They don’t hold for long distances!”

In the end, that meant they had two options. To leave, or take a risk. One that could kill the girl with the braids or worse. Or it could solve the whole thing, maybe even cure her. Or it could kill everyone in the area. Or–

“Yuan.”

He jumps; Binghe’s hands, warm and gentle, cups his face. Shen Yuan blinks. He didn’t notice how close his friend had gotten. Not until now, with Binghe’s thumb rubbing soothingly beneath his eye. *Thump, thump* goes his heart, and Shen Yuan hopes no one but him hears it. It is bad enough that he can feel his face flush.

“Binghe,” he says. Stops. Tries again, mouth feeling dry. He wants to stick his tongue out, to wet his lips. Instead Shen Yuan swallows and continues. “Binghe, what should we do?”

The protagonist should know.

Binghe looks at him, head tilted back just a little, still the shorter one of the two. Some hair has gotten loose. A curl of black, resting against his cheek. Shen Yuan tucks it behind Binghe’s ear. His reward is a smile.

“We should pour water on them,” Binghe says.

Freeze frame. He blinks. Binghe waits, until the hamster wheel in Shen Yuan's head slows down enough to let him *think.* He remembers the tea pets, how the girl's hands had still been wet from washing dishes as he coaxed her palm to stitch itself back together.

Water. Of course!

It is easy enough to accomplish. They fill two buckets with water from the well in the courtyard, ignoring the curious glances they receive from the rest of the household. The only one who truly reacts is Pan Fu; the damn rat blanches when he sees them walking towards the shed.

But he does not try to stop them.

"Would sir like to join?" Binghe calls out, all chipper and totally innocent, smiling sharp as knives, "We are going to wash sir's plates! Would he like to ensure we do not break them? There is room."

Shen Yuan has to bite back a laugh.

"Haha, no, no, this humble one trusts the young master cultivators," Pan Fu replies, his stupid mustache trembling. If they were closer, Shen Yuan bets they would see him sweating. As it is, he is already trying to edge back into the house. "If you believe they need to be washed, please, this humble one is grateful!"

"Is sir certain? Are they not *very expensive?"*

"And yet you caused such a fuss when your sister took a few," Pan Yingtai huffs beside her brother, crossing her arms.

"Well, my dear sister did not ask first," Pan Fu replies, "however, ah, speaking of, perhaps we shall have a little talk! About my shop, of course. Inside. It is so very warm today, it would be nice to be away from the sun, yes? We can't let your fair skin get worse, not unless you are to marry some poor blind man-"

"Excuse me?"

Yikes. Shen Yuan and Binghe both hurry back into the shed, careful to not spill any of the water. He uses qi to lock the door behind them, just in case. Perhaps they should wait until later, when the streets outside aren't so busy. But doing so would only make things worse for the girl; it is best to do it now. If they wait any longer, she will be a grandma aged seventeen.

"The other things too?" Shen Yuan asks as Binghe removes the lid of the crate, "the cups and bowls? They haven't been duplicated, so they must be safe."

"I'll put them somewhere else," Binghe says, carefully picking them up, "we can pour water on them later, to be sure."

"Alright. Ready?"

"On three," Binghe says, and they each heft up one bucket.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three!”

They tip the buckets and–

(Performing This Action Will Have Consequences! Would User Like To Proceed?)

Wait what?

Shen Yuan yanks his bucket back, but it’s too late. Half of it has already left, making the fish plates shine, and Binghe finishes tipping the rest and *fuck,* why the fuck is the System-

(New Quest Activated!)

Shen Yuan throws the bucket to the side.

The plates rattle; and then they all *crack,* all at once. It sounds like a gunshot, like a car crash. Shen Yuan covers his ears. On the other side of the box, Binghe winces, doing the same with one hand on one ear, using his other to grab Zheng Yang.

There is no yolk seeping from the plates. Instead of the orange gooeyness that he half-expects, Shen Yuan sees a bright shade of pink, of red. It reminds him of a tuna steak. It is squeezed inside of each piece of plate, pressed in between like a very bad sandwich. And then the thousands of broken pieces shift. Moves.

Takes shape.

Piecing together like a transformer robot, each bit layers over and over in a sinuous line, until what he is looking at is not broken plates, but scales. Scales of white and blue, the occasional glimpse of a fish, until Shen Yuan and Binghe have to take several steps back to take it in.

As the large serpent looms above them, its horns scraping the ceiling of the shed, it hisses. It sounds like a rattle snake. It sounds like plates sliding against plates, and it snarls at them. Its fangs are as long as Shen Yuan’s hand.

He reaches behind himself to unlock the door.

The System window *dings!*

(Good Luck! ♡ ♡＼(￣▽￣)／♡)

The mimic lunges.

Chapter End Notes

SY: cuckoo birds are so cool! Brood parasites are fascinating!! Don't you think so too, Binghe?
LBH: *stares into the void* I'm a brood parasite...
SY: sorry I didn't hear that?

Hi!!! Thank you for the patience, to no one's surprise I got sick again lmao. Technically not okay yet, but! Getting there! One day I'll give Shen Yuan my whole medical history. And it will be modern au. And cumplane. And they will have an emotional conversation about canned peaches. It will be great.

What do you guys think about this though hm?? hm??? It's not as cool as some of the theories I saw in the comments (LOVED them btw, you are all super creative) but y'know. *twirls hair* cuckoo birds are cool... and so are dragons...
Also this was 100% inspired by THIS lovely drawing that Lady Dysnomia drew a while ago. Thank you for letting me be inspired!!!

Also I've seen some fanart on twitter, but I don't actually have a twitter so I can't ask for permission to link it here. So if anyone on twitter is reading this and made fanart, please feel free to tell me in the comments if it's okay to link it! I don't want to assume <3 But even if you don't want to, please know I adore each and every one!

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They throw themselves out onto the courtyard.

Shen Yuan slams the door shut behind them, but it does nothing. There is the sound of wood splintering as it *breaks,* the mimic going through it like it is made of paper. Wood turned into confetti, pieces flying everywhere.

Someone screams; Shen Yuan doesn't know who, and he doesn't fucking care. He channels qi to make himself move quicker, using qinggong to launch forwards.

He hears the jaws snap behind him, narrowly missing.

"Plan!?" Shen Yuan shouts as he and Binghe whirl around to meet it.

The mimic hisses at them. It looks even bigger now, curled up and out in the sunny courtyard. Looming and swaying like an angry cobra, porcelain scales rattling. The sun glints against its horns. It's almost a surreal image. A painting that's come to very murderous life.

"We can't let it escape," Binghe calls back. He steadies himself. Holding Zheng Yang with both hands, ready to leap forward like the dashing cultivator he is. Focused, even now, dark eyes intent and unwavering from where he waits for it to make a move. "Does Yuan know how to keep it contained?"

Good question! They are in the middle of a city. Letting it out of the courtyard will cause panic. Even if they stopped the mimic itself from killing anyone, people would be trampled in the chaos. They have to kill it, but if they are too careless they may instead create openings in the walls for it to escape through. There may be injuries from the panicked household, if any tries to run past them to escape the area.

Normally Shen Yuan would try to get it to somewhere more open. The courtyard is far too cramped to fight something this big. If only it was smaller! Just a little, just enough that they could both fight it without getting in each other's way.

Wait.

The mimic lunges forward; Binghe swipes at it. Metal against porcelain *screeches,* sparks flying, and the serpent tries to bite Shen Yuan's head off. Using qi, he throws up a stone slab from the courtyard, right on time.

The stone cracks in its jaws. It spits out the pieces, looking even angrier than before.

"The talisman," Shen Yuan says, unsheathing Fu Yue as they keep moving around it, keeping it in place by confusion alone, "the shrinking one! Let's try that! It might work even if it's not a demon!"

“It may not have started as a demon, but it might be one by now,” Binghe points out as they pass each other, sounding rather miffed about it.

It’s a bad time to laugh, but he can’t help it. Binghe speaks as if he can’t get rid of a stubborn stain, not like they are fighting a deadly animal with fangs the length of their hands and a tail strong enough to crack stone.

“Maybe,” Shen Yuan agrees, “let’s play tag, yeah?”

“You’re it,” Binghe replies, and they exchange quick grins before they pick up speed. This game of tag they have played many times, after all. Binghe will keep it distracted.

Shen Yuan just has to tag it.

He jumps onto Fu Yue and flies upwards, narrowly avoiding a tail whack; Binghe stays on the ground, forcing the mimic to focus on him as he slides under its snapping jaws and strikes at its middle. The serpent hisses as it twists into itself, chasing after him.

Zheng Yang shines bright like the sun, the very air around it shimmering like the air on a hot summer day as Binghe strikes again and again, sparks flying for each hit. The scales must be harder than they look. They might have to use sword glares to get through it. Good for Zheng Yang with its laser focus and pinpoint accuracy, but Fu Yue’s is an AOE, and this is a narrow space to try it in. Their horses are *right* there.

Shen Yuan really hopes the talisman fucking works.

He crouches, keeping himself low to Fu Yue. It sings, the sound of it vibrating through his very core. It should be distracting, but it only sharpens his concentration. The beat of his heart steadies. He breathes. Rubs his thumb against the talisman in his hand.

They only have two of the talismans; if he misses, that’s it. The chance of success also relies on the placement of it. The best place to aim for is the mimic’s head, but the horns and the sinuous movements of it will make it a real challenge. Shen Yuan could aim for where he thinks the heart is and hope for the best, but honestly? The heart will be even harder to get at, right within biting reach. Assuming, of course, it shares the anatomy of a snake. For all they know, the heart could be in its ass.

Monster anatomy is *weird.*

Focus. Breathe. Binghe just did a really cool backflip, deflecting a fang with Zheng Yang. The sound rings out across the courtyard. Shen Yuan is vaguely aware of people peeking through the windows, terrified and delighted spectators. The mimic rears back and up, head held high as it rattles its scales.

Now.

He dives down, still crouched, the snake’s antlers pointing upwards like jagged branches, its head tilting backwards, and Shen Yuan reaches out, pouring qi into the talisman as he–

The mimic strikes down at Binghe. It happens quickly, enough so that Shen Yuan has no time to pull his arm back. The antlers strike him, the pain ringing through him as he yelps. The shock of it loosens his grip on the talisman. It lands lopsided on the back of its neck. Sticks to it, flashes. Falls off.

It doesn't work; all the more apparent now, when the mimic whirls around to face him, very much the same size as before.

"Fuck," he breathes, and lets Fu Yue say bye-bye to gravity. It makes his stomach drop, like he is on a rollercoaster. Above him, the mimic bites empty air. The sound of its snapping jaws echoes.

"Yuan!" Binghe calls out, "Yuan, are you-!?"

"I'm fine!" he calls back, flying low to the ground, moving so that he is behind it, "nothing broken! Just a little bruised!"

Binghe doesn't ask him if he's sure; by now, his friend knows he wouldn't lie about that. These past two years have taught them both to be honest about any injuries during battles. Shen Yuan still double-checks, of course. Adrenaline is a crazy thing.

A simple sweep of his own qi shows he's right. His arm is a little numb, but it will be fine. He will just have a nasty bruise once this is over. More importantly–

"I have one more try," Shen Yuan yells, "but it might not work at all even if I land it. Does Binghe have any ideas?"

"Tie it down, sword glare," Binghe replies, slashing upwards, trying to pierce through its bottom jaw, "the scales are too strong for normal attacks and it's too fast for sword glares!"

"Tie it down? With *what!?"*

"Yuan can do it," Binghe says confidently, pointing towards the storage shed and its very broken door. The storage shed with, admittedly, all the ropes inside. That doesn't make the idea any less *insane* though!

"It would be easier for Binghe to make it tie *itself* up," Shen Yuan shoots back, but he still flies towards the storage shed, because Binghe may be doing an awesome job at keeping the mimic distracted, but a cornered animal will only stay in one place for so long.

At least there's no door left to open!

Shen Yuan grabs every rope he can see, including the red one that had been tied around the box. He grabs the thickest ones he can find, not even sure how this will work.

How do you tie up a *snake?* If it had limbs, he could have tied those, but a massive fucking snake? Binghe really should stop having such high hopes for him! Though perhaps if he could pin it down? There is nothing to pin *with,* though. Nothing but qi.

Shen Yuan hauls the pile of ropes into his arms, Fu Yue wobbling briefly before it stabilizes. All of it together is heavy and awkward to hold. He won't be able to fly fast, not without dropping some. What can he do? Shen Yuan thinks back to all the leaves that Shen Qingqiu forced him to manipulate; all the cut bamboo that he had to assemble into shitty shields and walls, moving them around himself like some stupid video game with shitty graphics. He can control hundreds of leaves with ease by now. Rope is heavier, something different, but-

Maybe he doesn't need anything but his qi to pin down the mimic. Maybe, if he wields the ropes in the same way he did the leaves…

Outside, the mimic roars, followed by a loud *CLANG!* There is no more time to think. Shen Yuan hauls the pile of ropes over his shoulder and rushes back out.

Only to nearly fall off Fu Yue at the sight greeting him.

"It wasn't a challenge!" Shen Yuan laughs as he flies upwards to take stock of the situation. To admire Binghe's handiwork. Because Shen Yuan had told him he might as well tie the mimic itself into a knot, and apparently Binghe did just that. The serpent is a roiling, writhing mass of porcelain scales, so tangled up within itself that Shen Yuan isn't even sure they need the rope anymore.

Binghe, as always, never disappoints. His friend sends him a proud grin, eyes sparkling as he circles the mimic. Taunting it to remain where it is, too busy chasing after Binghe to notice its own predicament.

"Can Yuan tie it down before it frees itself?"

"Do I need to?" Shen Yuan calls back, unwinding one rope as he does, pouring qi into every fibre of it, "Binghe seems to have it handled!"

"This humble Shidi requests assistance-"

"Shut up," Shen Yuan laughs, and sends the first rope. There are no limbs to tie up, but he can minimize the damage it can do. Which is why he wraps the rope around the mimic's snapping jaws, until the creature can't open its mouth at all. It squirms and hisses, but Shen Yuan knows the rope won't give.

What next?

None of the ropes are all that long. The longest one is the red one, which Pan Fu had tied around the box of plates, but even that rope is too short to do much. Should he tie them together?

"Yuan!" Binghe yells and, oh fuck, the snake is smart. The snake is fucking smart because it's *detangling itself so fast.* Shen Yuan drops the ropes, grabs the talisman and dives towards its head. It's fine! It's fine, it can't bite! It won't be able to!

Shen Yuan slaps the talisman on its head and immediately gets headbutted.

He rears back, nearly falling off Fu Yue as he blinks stars out of his eyes, vision edged with white because *fuck* that hurt.Shen Yuan can feel sticky warmth drip down his face- did the mimic break his nose?

Before he can steady himself, he is tackled to the ground. Shen Yuan squeaks, then *squawks* upon impact. Binghe's hand protects his head from the ground, but it still hurts.

"Binghe!?"

"Didn't shrink," Binghe gasps, just in time for Shen Yuan's vision to return, the fuzziness swiftly replaced with cold reality. The mimic's head is where he used to be, now fully untangled and indeed still massive, tail thrashing madly as it tries to free itself from the ropes around its mouth. The talisman flaps harmlessly against its forehead, speckled with Shen Yuan's blood.

Apparently the talismans really *do* only work on demons, and apparently the *animal made of porcelain isn't one.*

Shen Yuan aims some vicious curses at the System. Per usual, all he receives are cheerful emotes waving pom-poms. After that, he and Binghe both have to roll out of the way and scramble to their feet, using hand-signs to summon their swords back, ready to deflect another attack.

It doesn't come.

Instead, the mimic turns its head towards the bustling street outside. Coiling itself up like a spring ready to burst.

Shen Yuan doesn't think.

The ropes go flying. One manages to wrap around the mimic's throat before he gets the ends attached to the ground, another is whacked away by its tail as it squirms. Good enough, he thinks, because it turns out one rope is hard enough. He can feel the strain of it. It's not just the rope he's controlling, but also the stone he is glueing it to. It is the tightness, to ensure the mimic can't slip out.

Shen Yuan can feel the fibers strain and tear. There is no time; they need to kill it now, or it will escape.

"Binghe!" he yells, having abandoned Fu Yue to fully focus on the rope, the *one* thing keeping it in place.

Binghe doesn't need more than that.

Zheng Yang cuts through the air; a slash of pure gold energy shoots forwards. Shen Yuan shuts his eyes as it slams into the mimic, sunspots dancing across his eyelids as it *roars.* Another burst of warmth from Zheng Yang, this time followed by the scent of blood, the sound of porcelain cracking, shrieking against the stone courtyard.

Silence.

Shen Yuan feels the rope slacken. Panting, he lets it go, blinking his eyes open to take it in. Blood coats his tongue, his nose feels stuffed, but–

The mimic is dead.

Binghe did it! Shen Yuan grins, nearly laughs, feeling dizzy with adrenaline and pure joy, and- and the mimic is *dead.* It's dead. Shen Yuan stares at it, and suddenly doesn't feel all that happy about it. Because it's dead.

Of course it is.

That was the goal; to kill the beast that was causing harm. It was the only way to save the girl from wasting away, the only way to prevent more death. Now it's laid out on the courtyard, a sprawling mass of blue and white and blood red, cut in two right down the middle. Zheng Yang even managed to cut through the stone beneath.

Its eyes remain wide open, staring towards the sky.

Even dead, it is a gorgeous thing to behold. It looks like a macabre sculpture on display. Like it was never alive, but instead crafted by a skilled artist, now unveiled for everyone to admire, to gawp at.

It was one of a kind.

Shen Yuan stares at it, Fu Yue's whispers feeling like cold water lapping against his palm as he summons the sword back to him.

It is not the first time they killed a beast, and it won't be the last. But this is different, he thinks. They never killed something so unique. Whatever joy, whatever sense of victory and relief he felt at its defeat, has now sizzled into nothing.

Binghe is kneeling by it, pressing a hand against porcelain scales. Is he aware how similar the two of them are? Binghe doesn't know that he too is unique, a miracle that came alive, an impossibility in a world of magic. There will never be another like him. Like the dragon they have killed, Binghe will always be unique.

And alone.

Shen Yuan rubs a hand against his chest, feeling queasy. A deep breath. In. Out. Inhale, exhale. Count.

He sheaths Fu Yue, and moves to join his friend.

(Quest Completed! Defeat The Porcelain Serpent: 300 B-Points Awarded! Congratulations!)

Once the dust has settled, one would think that they would be given enough time to catch their breath, to figure out what to do with the mimic's body. They need to get it home, to figure out *how* to get it back home with one standard issue qiankun pouch and two horses.

Pan Fu has other ideas.

"We cannot allow you to keep the remains," Shen Yuan protests, eyeing up the old man's hands. He's rubbing them together, like a classic greedy NPC would, and Shen Yuan doesn't trust him for a *moment.* If he looks away, the bastard might just try and steal a scale or something. "It's a magical beast whose remains can be used in a myriad of ways. We must bring it back to our sect."

"Ah, but my investment!" Pan Fu protests, "the losses! Does this one not own this carcass? The plates I bought–"

"Were normal plates," Shen Yuan says, wanting to tear his hair out, "the beast was only an unfortunate complication. Sir."

"It does not matter whether we want to give it to sir or not," Binghe smoothly interjects, "the Lord of Xi Jiao Peak would not let us. If sir wishes to be certain, we could send a message to Lord Tang, to see if she would be willing."

"But she would likely only be upset about the beast rotting during the wait," Shen Yuan adds. Because yes, he is pretty damn sure that Tang Qingling would go crazy over this discovery.

Not that he has spoken much to her. But she *is* the Lord over the peak of beasts. It's only logical that she would want to examine the mimic, see what they can make of it.

If they can figure out how to transport it.

And also if Pan Fu gives up.

How come the guy still looks ancient, anyway? Shen Yuan had kind of assumed the mimic was leeching his life force, too, but- well, he would be dead then, wouldn't he? Does he truly just have unfortunate genes?

"Surely she is a… reasonable woman…"

"This one does not think-"

Creak.

They turn around; the gate to the courtyard is now wide-open. A male servant, lucky enough to miss the action, stares wide-eyed at the giant monster before him, the now rope-free jaws gaping, showing off the massive fangs.

The people out on the street also stare.

How long did it take for them to dare to peek inside, after all that ruckus? Has the whole street been holding its breath, waiting for another angry roar? Shen Yuan can see a city guard far in the back. Was he stationed there or called? Why is he in the *back?*

The servant slams the gate closed, and that is when panic ensues. From beyond the walls, they can all hear people screaming and running. The stampede that he and Binghe had worked so hard to prevent, has now happened, all because of one dead animal.

Shen Yuan closes his eyes.

There is literally nothing they can do about *that.* So he takes a deep breath, and decides to just. Focus on more important things. Because fuck it.

“Binghe,” he says, turning away from Pan Fu, “we need to cut it into parts to bring it home, don’t we?”

“If we are to preserve it in a qiankun pouch,” Binghe agrees, standing up from where he had been crouched. Examining the horns, blue and branching. One of them cracked during the fight, a white line going through it but not yet breaking, “if we don’t cut it up, we can’t fit it into the one we have.” He pauses, then pulls out a handkerchief from his pockets.

“I don’t like the idea of cutting it up and stuffing it in with the siyokoy,” Shen Yuan says. It feels sacrilegious, putting such a beautiful, unique creature with the decapitated heads of something so foul.

Binghe hums, and then brings the handkerchief to Shen Yuan’s face. He jumps, unprepared, before he remembers.

Right. The nose-bleed.

“Ah,” he says, cheeks warm, “that’s why my nose felt stuffed.”

His friend gives him a look of pure exasperation, fond and concerned, even as he gently starts cleaning Shen Yuan’s face. Doing his best to not agitate Shen Yuan’s nose, Binghe does that cute little frowny face he sometimes does when concentrating.

“Is it broken?” Binghe asks.

Pan Fu flounders in the back.
They both ignore him.

“No,” Shen Yuan says, after a quick sweep of qi, “no, just… it’s only bleeding. Thank you, Binghe.” Whatever nasty bruise he might get, Shen Yuan can just heal away later. So it’s fine. Shen Qingqiu might not kill them just yet.

He is tired, though. The fight was draining, and he still feels- whatever, about having to kill the mimic. He just wants this to be over, and for his nose to stop bleeding. He wants to go home.

“Master cultivators,” Pan Fu wheedles, “if it is so difficult to transport it, *surely* the monster can be left here? This one will take good care of it, until Lord Tang arrives!”

Oh, yeah, *sure.* And then the body will have been mysteriously stolen by the time any cultivators arrive, and Pan Fu will be *so* sorry about it.

Fuck! Why is it only Bai Zhan Peak and Xi Jiao Peak that get the *big* qiankun pouches? They could do with one right now, just stuff the whole mimic right in there, no fuss no problem!

Shen Yuan thinks *all* peaks should have access to the different bags.

Not just the big ones, but the ones for cursed shit, too, that Lie Jiu Peak has. It makes no sense to limit the different types to different peaks! So what if Bai Zhan Peak more often hunts down criminals, and requires the whole body to be brought back? Or that Xi Jiao Peak often hunts down giant beasts? Now they are stuck here, possibly having to butcher a giant snake that took *two* sword glares to cut through, and with a qiankun pouch that can only contain so many dead things.

“We cannot risk it,” Shen Yuan bites out, turning away from Binghe’s blood-stained handkerchief, and really, isn’t it polite to wait for the bleeding to *stop* before being bothersome!? “The beast has unknown magical properties. Leaving it alone may trigger some of them.”

Pan Fu falters. His mustache droops.

“But it is dead, is it not?”

“Dead creatures can still cause harm,” Binghe says, a twist and a light nudge and suddenly he is the one closest to Pan Fu. Shielding Shen Yuan from view, the stained handkerchief pressed into his hands, “surely sir has heard of demonic corpses that tainted the lands long after they were slain?”

“But… but this is not a demon!”

“It might have been,” Binghe points out, “that is why we must take it back, to be certain.”

He continues to speak, but Shen Yuan finds his attention drifting towards the gate. Should he lock it, so that no one else will try to enter before they’re done? Or will the city guard see that as a crime? Should he sneak away, hoping to find that one stall again, with the qiankun pouches that Binghe insisted were fake? Should he–

The gate slams open, the door bouncing off against the walls on either side. Shen Yuan jumps, nearly dropping the handkerchief as his hand falls to Fu Yue out of pure reflex.

He stops.

“Xiao-Shidi?” he blurts out.

For in the entrance stands Lin Jie.

He has changed from when Shen Yuan first met him. Still scrawny, still with his pale hair, eyes and skin. But he is taller, reaching Shen Yuan's shoulder, and his hair is tied up in a ponytail that's only just begun to come loose. He must have been running; his white Bai Zhan robes are in disarray, his cheeks are flushed pink and he is gasping for breath, clutching his sword in one hand.

The poor thing must have heard the commotion and thought there was trouble! Ah, Shen Yuan can't help but be proud. He still bites sometimes, but these days mostly people who deserve it! He's almost a proper, upstanding young man now!

"Yuan-ge," the boy says and then Shen Yuan's arms are full, and oh, he hopes he doesn't get any blood on Lin Jie. Still, he can't help but hug him back. Who could? He must have been so worried, to already be this clingy!

"What is A-Jie doing here?" he asks, wincing only a little as the boy's fingers dig into his back, "this is so far away! Did Liu-shishu leave the sect again?"

Lin Jie has a bad habit of sneaking away from the sect whenever Liu Qingge is away. Thankfully, it always happens when Shen Yuan and Binghe are out too, so they often end up running into each other! Lin Jie has a terrible sense of direction, it seems, always getting lost.

"Yuan-ge is hurt," Lin Jie hisses against his neck, like a scared little tiger cub. Shen Yuan holds back a coo. It will only make the boy more upset, and Binghe will pout as well. They're both so silly.

"Only a little, and it's fine," he reassures him, gently prying Lin Jie off of him, "it is only my nose, and I'll fix it right up. But Binghe and I are busy, so can A-Jie be patient?"

Lin Jie scowls up at him, arms still wrapped around Shen Yuan's waist, refusing to budge. Then his pale blue eyes flick towards the dead mimic. A spark of interest takes hold.

"What's that?"

"It's a beast we just killed," Shen Yuan says, tucking loose locks of hair behind Lin Jie's ears, trying to smooth down the flyaways, "so we must attend to our duties right now as a result. Maybe Xiao-Shidi could go and wait by the horses?"

"Or," Binghe says, stepping up to them, "Lin-shidi could answer Shixiong's questions. Why is Lin-shidi here?"

It comes out rather pointed. Shen Yuan frowns at him, then winces, because fucking ow, his nose.

"... they said a monster was here," Lin Jie reluctantly says after scowling fiercely at Binghe, "so I ran."

"Why are you in the *city?"* Binghe asks.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan sighs, "does that matter? He must have taken on a night hunt nearby."

“Is this another martial brother of yours?” Pan Fu pipes up. Shen Yuan’s face must be doing a *thing* at the sound of the old man’s voice, because Lin Jie immediately goes from adorably grumpy, to as tense as a live wire. He bares his teeth at Pan Fu, hissing, and Shen Yuan tugs him into a hug again to muffle it.

“He is,” Shen Yuan says, totally not taking some glee in how Pan Fu flinched back at Lin Jie’s display, “but he is young, so our Shishu must be nearby.” Probably not. Liu Qingge is *kind* of good at hunting down Lin Jie, but only when he knows the boy has gotten lost. “Which means we must hurry! He has no patience, the War God of Bai Zhan Peak. If sir has complaints about our decision, please send a message to our sect.”

“The War God… surely he can’t be part of that peak!” Pan Fu exclaims, “he looks like a little doll! Why, I’m certain I’ve sold dolls that look just like him in the past!”

Shen Yuan’s arms tighten around Lin Jie.

“He’s a real person,” he snaps, “not a *thing* to be sold.”

Silence falls; for a moment, he and Pan Fu stare at each other. Binghe holds himself still. Shen Yuan does not let go of Lin Jie, and does not want to risk Pan Fu looking at him for a *second* more.

Against Shen Yuan’s chest, there is the distinct sound of a growling kitten. He blinks, then clears his throat and begins to drag Lin Jie towards the stables, to Bao and Lotus who idly watches.

Cultivator horses are made of steel; they didn’t even *neigh* during the battle. Shen Yuan lets go of Lin Jie to give both of them a pat. To make his hands stop trembling.

He feels a little bad about Binghe taking care of Pan Fu, but he knows his friend can wrap it up quickly. Which he does! Record-speed, at that, soon joining them by the stables, Pan Fu slinking back into the house.

“Maybe we can rent a wagon,” Shen Yuan suggests, reaching out to tug Binghe closer. To look him over, too, because Shen Yuan hardly got into contact with the mimic and still ended up with a nosebleed.

He pushes up Binghe’s sleeves and isn’t surprised at all to find scratches and bruises right there. He makes sure to be gentle as he traces them, mapping them out with the tip of his fingers. It’s not needed, he knows. But it eases something wound tight, deep within, to do so.

Binghe, of course, lets him.

“It wouldn’t solve the problem of it rotting,” Binghe says, “but Yuan is forgetting something.”

“Hm? What is it?” Shen Yuan looks him over, “did you get hurt somewhere else? Don’t make me strip you. Ah, Xiao-Shidi, let go of my sleeve. I need to concentrate.”

Lin Jie grumbles but does as told; Binghe huffs a laugh.

“If Lin-shidi hasn’t completed his mission, he may have a qiankun pouch to lend,” Binghe points out as Shen Yuan soothes away the bruises, nudging the scratches to scab over and heal with a careful press of his hand, “has Yuan not said that the ones from Bai Zhan Peak are big enough for creatures like this?”

Oh.

Oh!

“Does A-Jie have one to lend?” Shen Yuan asks, smiling hopefully at the boy, “I would be very grateful if you did.” He nods towards the mimic’s body. “The beast is too big for the bag we brought.”

“I have *two,”* Lin Jie proudly says.

“How lucky,” Shen Yuan says, relieved, “so then we can borrow one?”

“Maybe both,” Binghe cuts in, “don’t forget all the books, and the tea pets that Yuan bought.”

“The tea pets are *gifts,”* Shen Yuan protests, but Lin Jie is already nodding furiously, holding up both bags.

One is pristine. The other…

“Did… JieJie use that one?” Shen Yuan asks, eyeing the blood stains on it. They look a few days old, at the very least. Maybe he’s wrong. It’s possible someone from Bai Zhan Peak didn’t clean it before handing it over.

“I’ll empty it,” Lin Jie says, turning it upside down-

“No, no, that’s- oh fuck that’s. Alright,” Shen Yuan says, staring at what looks like a *very* fucked up head of- something? What *is* that? It’s like an ox had a child with a toad and a bloated pug, no what *is that!?* “Maybe we can put that in with the siyokoy,” he finally decides. “It’s… small enough.”

“...”

“... Binghe?”

“Is that an Abyss-monstrosity?”

“No, it can’t be.” Wait. No. The *Immortal Alliance Conference* was soon. Airplane had mentioned that it took Mobei-Jun a lot of practice to open a rift even for a moment to that place, not to talk about them working to get all the artifacts needed to power it up to maximum and- that wasn’t important.

Shen Yuan stares at the head.

“It might be,” he finally says, “A-Jie, where did you *find* this?”

“Night hunt,” Lin Jie so eloquently says, “it was dying. Stupid can’t breathe air. Easy.”

“It *is* from the Endless Abyss, the air is said to be toxic there,” Shen Yuan faintly says. “How- how did Binghe recognize it so quickly?”

“Yuan has made me memorize all the texts on that place for years,” Binghe replies, still staring at the- thing. “It’s a blobheaded blue-tongued hound.”

It’s so fucking ugly.

“Wow,” Shen Yuan says, and chokes because oh it *reeks,* “put- let’s put it in the bag, alright? Um, here, Xiao-shidi. You do that while Binghe and I put the mimic in this one, alright? That’s a good boy.”

He gives his head a pat, and Lin Jie preens.

Binghe mutters something under his breath, but manages to exchange bags with just a little bit of a tug-o-war between them. There aren't even any bite attempts from either side!

After that, it doesn’t take long to get things in order. The mimic’s body slinks into the big qiankun pouch like a slippery noodle, a giant body neatly stuffed away. Shen Yuan washes his face and heals enough of his nose to numb the pain, and then they only have to prepare the horses and bid farewell to Pan Yingtai.

If Binghe notices him slipping one of the mimic’s scales into his pocket, he says nothing.

“We apologize for the mess,” Shen Yuan says as Pan Yingtai purses her lips, looking out at the crushed stones and the tree that’s lost two branches sometime during the fight, “if one wishes to seek compensation, please forward a message to our sect.”

“Oh, this one is only grateful for the help,” Pan Yingtai says, looking back at him, “who knows what could have happened, if you two had not been here. My foolish brother would have brought ruin to the whole city, at the very least.” Her eyes narrow. “As it is, this one will be *generous* and give him a week to find other accommodations, as he is no longer welcome here. Poor Mei has shown me her hand. Is… there any chance at all, for it to be healed?”

Ah, the poor servant girl. At least that means she’s still alive; Shen Yuan is fairly certain she had been hiding behind the stables during the fight. It’s… it’s also nice, seeing a Lady care for her servants like this. Maybe it’s foolish to believe her to care. Maybe she is only keeping up appearances. But she hasn’t seemed cruel, not once since they arrived.

He smiles.

“This one is no expert on curse injuries,” he admits, “so this one cannot say. But we do plan to tell those at home. If it is possible to heal her hand, then someone at the sect will know. Though… it might take a while. The Immortal Alliance Conference is soon, so things are quite busy. This one is uncertain when a healer can be spared.”

“That is more than I expected,” Pan Yingtai admits, “thank you, both of you.”

“Thank you for housing us,” Shen Yuan replies, inclining his head, “we will take our leave now.”

It’s honestly a relief when the gate closes behind them. Shen Yuan breathes out, steering Bao by the reins as they make their way out of the city. He and Binghe carry one large qiankun pouch each, and the books and tea pets have been safely stored away in the clean one. Their original bag is tied to Bao’s saddle, swinging idly, not a single outward sign of the foul, gross things it holds within.

Lin Jie trails alongside them, one hand clutching at Shen Yuan’s sleeve. He doesn’t mind; the boy has never liked crowds, nor cities. The fact that everyone is *staring* at them isn’t helping.

“Lin-shidi can fly ahead if he wishes,” Binghe casually suggests, “after all, there is no need for him to stay here.”

“No. I stay.”

“If Xiao-Shidi is uncomfortable…”

“I stay.”

“Alright,” Shen Yuan smiles, “but we will be riding once we exit the city gates. Will A-Jie be fine then?”

Lin Jie nods. Stops. Seems to consider things carefully, eyes flicking towards Bao, then back to Shen Yuan. He seems to think deeply.

Shen Yuan bites back a laugh and sends Binghe a grin, instead.

“How should we frame the report to Shizun, so that he may be less displeased?” he asks, “does Binghe have any ideas?”

“We have days to plan ahead,” his friend replies, “Yuan shouldn’t worry about it yet. Are you sure you don’t want to rest at an inn before we leave?”

It’s tempting. He really is tired, feeling the fatigue down to his very bones. They both know that the sect is hardly more restful at the moment, everyone scrambling about, preparing for the big event. Ming Fan had looked haunted when they *left,* he must look haggard by now.

But it is still home. Shen Yuan wants his own bed, their own room. He wants to sit down and eat apples with Ning Yingying and drink tea with Shen Qingqiu, and he wants to make sure Lin Jie doesn’t get lost on the way home. He wants to tell Yue Qingyuan of the books he bought, and he wants to deliver the tea pets to their martial aunts and uncles.

He just wants to go home.

“I’m fine,” he says, and means it, “Binghe must be tired too. If you want to rest before we leave, you can tell me.”

Binghe smiles back.

“No, I’m fine,” he echoes back, and Shen Yuan laughs, “Shijie will be upset if we take too long.”

“That she will.”

“I’m tired,” Lin Jie abruptly says.

“Oh!” Shen Yuan blinks down at him, the boy’s cheeks puffed out, blue eyes narrowed. “Does Xiao-shidi wish to stay and rest then?”

“No! Too tired to fly,” the boy clarifies, “can I ride with Yuan-ge?”

“Is A-Jie still not used to flying yet? Of course you can ride with me on Bao,” he reassures him, tugging the younger boy into a one-armed hug, “he *is* a cultivator’s horse. He can carry us both.”

And besides, Lin Jie doesn’t weigh much at all. He can’t say that though; Lin Jie doesn’t like being called small.

“Lotus is bigger,” Binghe pointedly says, “perhaps Lin-shidi should ride with *me* instead.”

Shen Yuan gives Binghe a look of pure disbelief.

“I don’t think poor Lotus deserves that,” he wryly says, “we are all too tired for childish bickering, don’t you two think so?”

Both Binghe and Lin Jie blushed before exchanging glares. Quickly followed by them turning away in unison, with a great huff.
Shen Yuan laughs, and once they are finally outside the city and all its staring eyes, he helps Lin Jie get up on Bao.

He makes sure to ride close enough to Binghe that he can nudge their boots together, though. Just to be sure.

Binghe nudges back with a smile.

All is well, and they’re going home.

Chapter End Notes

SY: I want to lay down and sleep for a week and also bite someone I'm sick and tired of EVERYTHING-
LJ: Yuan-ge!
SY: omg my baby boy my widdle baby boy hiii my widdle tiger cub-!
LBH: *gritting teeth* wow Lin-shidi is here that's so nice
LJ: *smugly squished against SY's chest*

No other POV for once! Wow :0

One burst eardrum, one minor cold and one sprained wrist later, an update has arrived! I won't lie, playing Silksong is actually the biggest reason this took so long but let's blame my immune system and hyper-flexibility instead of a masterpiece yes??? You can't blame Hornet. Look at her. She floats like a balloon. Dingle-dangle.

IAC IS APPROACHING. IT IS HERE BASICALLY!!! And did anyone miss Lin Jie??? He's here! Baby boy!
In this world, BingYuan is too equal for SY to feel comfortable babying Binghe. But as a friend pointed out, SY is like a chicken. He needs an egg to fuss over or he will find one; and so Lin Jie is the winner because Xiao-Shimei wants to be cool and badass and independent just like NYY. No fussing for her unless she has a booboo. But Lin Jie.... give it all to him. He will greedily hoard it and Binghe will be so cool and mature about it.

(LJ's number 1 biting victim these days is LQG. Usually when forcibly dragged back to the sect)

Fanart omg :D

Amorent-Akiir has made this painting like beautiful art of Binghe's pov admiring SY <3

Vainvaiheart drew this delightful, basically a book cover, of SY being his adorably exhausted "trying his best" self!

Works inspired by this one

Toxic by Prim_the_Amazing

(Podfic) Shen Yuan of No Relation by Gemi by kickit_kick

Shen Yuan of No Relation [Podfic] by Gemi by ImpureLily

A Word for the Yielding by unwrittenhour

So I hold you in wretched hands (The only way I can) by Backoffbleep

Book Smart by ImpureLily

[Restricted Work] by yendish

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!